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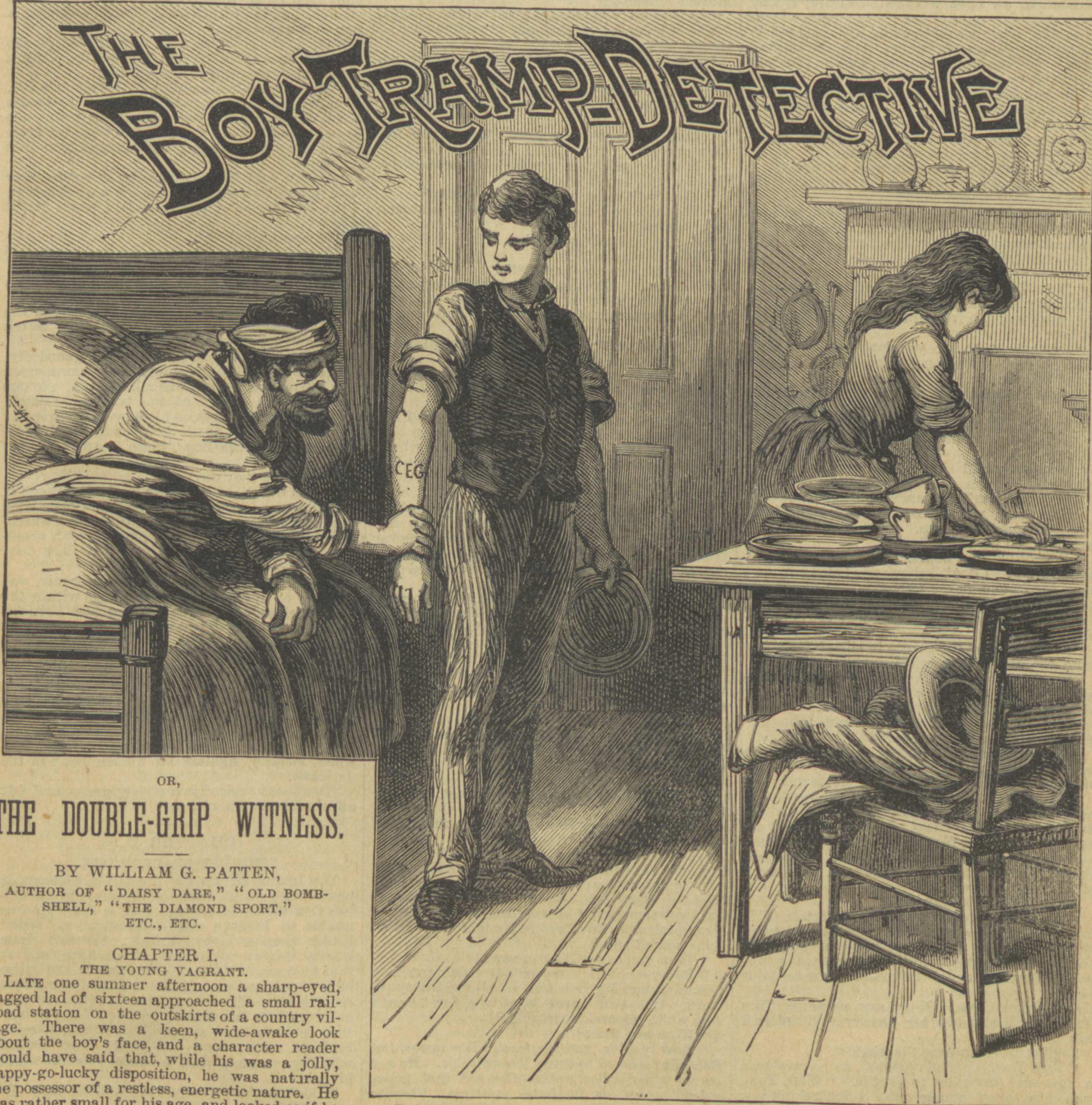
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OR,

THE DOUBLE-GRIP WITNESS.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "DAISY DARE," "OLD BOMB-
SHELL," "THE DIAMOND SPORT,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE YOUNG VAGRANT.

LATE one summer afternoon a sharp-eyed, ragged lad of sixteen approached a small railroad station on the outskirts of a country village. There was a keen, wide-awake look about the boy's face, and a character reader would have said that, while his was a jolly, happy-go-lucky disposition, he was naturally the possessor of a restless, energetic nature. He was rather small for his age, and looked as if he was used to all kinds of privations.

EAGERLY THE WOUNDED MAN SCANNED THE TATTOOED ARM OF THE BOY TRAMP, AND
A CRY OF DELIGHT BROKE FROM HIS LIPS.

He walked along slowly, glancing sharply around as he approached the station. No one was in view except two small urchins who were sailing chips on a pool near the rough building which was known as the freight-house. The boy turned away, muttering as he did so:

"Wal, here I be, a stranger in a forren kentry. I feel better nor I did a while ergo. 'Cause why? 'Cause w'en I tole the kind ole gal with ther time-scratched phiz that I waz an orphing who'd never known ther tender touch ov a step-mother's number nine slipper an' that I had a hoel in me big enough ter incarcereate a ham, w'y, she just trotted out ther hash—an' I filled. Fu'st square meal I've had fur more nor a week ov Sundays.

"Now w'at's ther next act onter ther pro-grammy? Guess I'd better git out ov this town by ther next train. S'pose if I sent a tellygram to ther president ov this railroad, tellin' just how I'se fixed, he'd send down a speshul Pullman fur my 'commeydashun. Don't believe I'll bother 'bout it, though. Peraps I'll jump ther next Freight. An empty box is good ernuff fer my style."

With his hands in his pockets, carelessly whistling, he strolled along the platform until he came to an open window. Within, sitting in his shirt-sleeves, and perspiring copiously as he doubled over his desk, evidently engaged in footing a column of figures, was the station-agent. He was a young man, and had been in charge of the station but a few weeks.

The boy seated himself upon a truck near the window and waited for the agent to complete the task upon which he was engaged. Finally the young man uttered an impatient exclamation and closed his book with a slam.

"Hang the luck!" he exclaimed, savagely.

"That would be capital punishment," observed the boy on the truck.

The station-agent looked around and noticed the strange lad for the first time. He scowled a little, although his face was naturally a pleasant one. Ed Collins was in no pleasant mood just then.

"Eh? What's that?" he demanded shortly.

The boy saw in an instant that the agent was not in an amiable frame of mind, and he quietly replied:

"I just want to ax ye w'at time ther next train is due. I reckon you're ther main guy round this shanty."

Collins looked searchingly at the lad before he replied. He did not remember having seen the ragamuffin before. The boy returned his gaze squarely, a smile lurking around his well-cut mouth.

"Reckon you'll know me next time," he laughed.

"Who are you?" demanded the agent.

"Say, boss, you answer my question fu'st, then I'll answer yourn. How long 'fore ther next train'll git along?"

"It may be two hours. What do you want to know for? I don't believe you belong around here, for I have never seen you. What's your name?"

"It may be John Sullivan," was the calm reply.

Collins gazed at the gamin in silence for a few moments, and then laughed.

"You're a cranky kid," he observed, not ill-naturedly, taking out his watch and glancing at its face. "The next train is due at 5:45."

"An' my uncle's name is Solomon Johnson," quietly declared the ragged lad.

The station-agent did not quite catch the boy's meaning until the lad felt slowly through his pockets, then shook his head, muttering:

"Gone—solid gold, full jeweled, stem-winder, regulated ther sun, moon an' stars, an' divided daylight frum darkness. Dunno where I'll git another watch like that one. I miss it like time, an' I've got so I dunno w'en hash-time comes. Result is, I don't git more'n one meal a week, an' allus miss ther keers."

Again Ed Collins laughed.

"You're a regular crank," he asserted. "It is now ten minutes past four. As the next train is due at 5:45 it will be at least an hour and thirty-five minutes before it shows up, for it is never ahead of time. Sometimes it is an hour late."

"Thankee, boss. Now my name is Tom Tack, an' I'm ready ter answer anythin' as I kin."

Collins moved nearer the window.

"Tom Tack, eh?" he repeated, as he produced a cigar and proceeded to light it. "Well, Tom, you're a saucy young cub. I don't think you live around here."

"No, I don't!" confessed the boy, and then

he added: "Say, mister, don't you know it hain't perlite ter smoke in company?"

"You'll have to excuse me," smiled the agent.

"It's er dreadful brooch ov etticat. I never did like ter take er second-handed smoke. P'raps you hain't got ernuther Collyrado My-deero in yer pocket?"

"What if I have?"

"Oh, I didn't know but you waz feelin' kinder gen'rus 'bout now. I'm an elegant subjec' fer charity."

"You don't mean to say that you smoke?"

"Try me an' see."

With a grim smile the station man produced a cigar and passed it to the boy, who seized it eagerly, saying:

"You're a dandy, boss, frum ther groun' up. It's been er long day since I've had ther sackers-faction ov gittin' my forks onter a smoker like this. Snipes hav' bin 'bout all I could afford."

Eagerly he bit off the end, and quickly producing a match, was soon puffing out clouds of smoke.

"By gingerbread!" exclaimed the strange lad. "This is style, you know. I begin ter feel like I waz a relative ov Jay Gould. Stumic full, an' a cigar! My gracious!"

And he really looked as if he was enjoying himself immensely.

"Where do you belong, Tom?" asked Collins. The boy paused to blow out a perfect ring of smoke ere he replied.

"Belong?" he repeated. "I don't belong nowhere."

"But you must have a home."

"Is that so? Wal, I hain't got none, just ther same."

"But, where do you live? Surely you live somewhere?"

"Wal, ter tell ther truth, I live anywhere. I'm a sort ov street free rover."

"You don't mean that you're a tramp?"

"Who tole ye I didn't? Guess that's w'at sum folks 'ud call it."

"But you're only a boy."

"Wal, I'm growin'."

"Haven't you any parents?"

"Guess not. Reckon I waz born an orphing; but even that style ov jumpin' inter existence has its advantages, for I never hav' had no step-mother."

"But you must have friends, a guardian, or some one to look out for you?"

A cloud swept over Tom's face. He seemed to hesitate about something; then he looked Collins fair in the face and said:

"I hain't much ov a han' to blab, but I like you, mister, an' I don't mind tellin' you that there is a big chump as let's on he's my boss. I've lived with him ever since I kin 'member, an' we've tramped 'most everywhere."

"He is not your father?"

"Wal, I guess not! He never claimed he waz. He's a big, two-fisted sinner an' calls his self Big Bob. He's a reg'lar crook, but he never tried ter git me inter his dirty work. I just dunno why, but he's allus seemed 'feard I'd give him away to ther flys."

"The flies?" repeated Collins, in amazement.

"Yes, ther flys—detectives. He's never been collared since I kin remember, an' he thinks he's 'tarnal smart."

"But where is this man now?"

"I'll never tell you," replied the boy, with a wink and a grin. "He an' I dissolved partnerships more'n a month ergo."

"How did that happen?"

"Wal, ye see, Bob waz goin' ter beat me, an' I had all I wanted ov that kind ov business. I slid, an' hav' kep' clear ov him since."

"You ran away?"

"Wal, I reckon you could call it that. I made tracks pritty spry."

"And you have been footing it since then? When did you come to this place?"

"Last night."

"At what time?"

"Long 'bout twelve, I guess. I kem in on the Night Freight. One ov the brakemen spotted me an' I got ther grand bounce w'en we got here. I waz goin' on to Rockford to see if I c'u'dn't hit some work there."

"Then you are willing to work?"

"Bet yer life! I never did think much ov trampin', but Big Bob was too 'tarnal lazy ter work. But he'd never leave me, for he sed I waz wu'th my weight in gold."

"How was that?"

"Now you've got me, boss. It's queer, but Bob allus seemed to think I'se vallyble. He had an old yaller paper, an' he often sed that paper an' I'd make his forchune sumtime. I kinder got an idee that ther paper really belonged ter me!"

"Did you ever see the paper?" asked the station-agent, who was becoming greatly interested in the Boy Tramp's story.

"Yes, onc't. It waz all kivered with marks."

"Writing? Did you read it?"

Tom's face grew red.

"Lord, boss!" he exclaimed, shamefacedly, "I can't read!"

Then, as he noted Collins's look of surprise, he added, half-fiercely:

"'Tain't my fault! I've never had no chance. Bob w'u'dn't let me learn. He sed 'twarn't good fer boys ter know too much. I'd 'a' learnt if I c'u'd."

The station-agent smoked in silence for several minutes, watching the boy closely. Tom gazed down at the platform, and allowed his cigar to go out. Finally he noticed this and carefully placed the half-smoked weed in his pocket, "for future reference," as he expressed it.

"Rockford is eighty miles from here. How do you expect to get there?" Collins at length asked.

"Wal, I c'u'd fut it if hard up, but I mean to jump a train," was a frank reply.

The agent said nothing further just then, but turned away to attend to some work. A short time later he observed that the Boy Tramp was stretched at full length on the truck, enjoying a nap in the sunshine.

Tom Tack lay thus until the whistle of the Freight aroused him. As he sat up, Collins came out of the station and said:

"Tom, I've taken a notion to give you a lift. You say you want to go to Rockford to secure work and I believe you. There isn't any one around, and if I can get a chance when the train hands are not looking, I will smuggle you into an empty."

"Boss," said Tom, earnestly, "you're ther best feller I've struck for a week ov Sundays. W'en I git ter be a millyonheir, I won't fergit you."

The agent laughed.

"I'm afraid I shall have to wait a long time," he said.

Then the long Freight pulled into the station and stopped.

"There will be a little shifting," muttered the station-master in a low tone. "I will watch my chance; you watch me."

"All right, boss," responded Tom, guardedly. Collins joined the trainmen. Every one seemed in a hurry as the train was a little late. No one cast a second glance at the boy on the truck, but Tom kept his eyes on his new-found friend.

"We've got to hustle if we cross the Express at Sherman's," the Boy Tramp heard one man say.

And hustle they did.

Collins watched his chance, and when it came, he pulled the door of one of the boxes open wide enough for Tom to pass in. No one was watching him. He made a swift gesture, and, a moment later, Tom sprung into the car. The door instantly closed behind him.

The boy, having just left the outer air, was unable to discern his surroundings within the tightly closed car. The change had been so sudden that his eyes were not yet accustomed to the gloom.

He stood perfectly still and heard young Collins go whistling away; then he knew the trick had not been observed.

A moment later, in making connections, the moving part of the train came against the standing portion with a thump. The shock was so sudden that the Boy Tramp was pitched forward, striking against an unseen body in the darkness.

Then he was seized in a strong grasp, and felt an iron hand on his throat!

CHAPTER II.

TOM'S DESPERATE ESCAPE.

TOM had no time to cry out before that strong hand closed on his neck and he was held as helpless as a mouse in the grasp of a cat. He was unable to breathe and could make no sound louder than a hoarse gurgle. He felt those sinewy fingers crush into his windpipe, and at that moment believed that he was in the grasp of a desperate wretch who really intended to murder him. His eyes bulged from their sockets as he made a few feeble, frantic efforts to tear that choking hand away. Bright lights began to flash before him, and everything seemed whirling around, when a hoarse voice hissed in his ear:

"Don't ye dare to squawk, you little imp! Ef ye do I'll break yer dirty neck!"

Then the terrible fingers relaxed a little, and

uttering a groan of relief, the Boy Tramp sunk to the floor. His fears had suddenly vanished, for he had recognized the voice of his captor.

It was Big Bob!

He lay on the floor, gasping and rubbing his throat, while his old "boss" knelt beside him.

"You little wretch!" hoarsely whispered the large ruffian. "So I've cotched ye, hev I? I'll larn ye ter run away frum me! I'll larn ye ter desart yer lawful master!"

Again the brute seized the helpless lad.

"Hole on, Bob," whispered another voice. "Don't go fer ter kill ther pore kid."

Tom managed to gasp:

"Lemme 'lone, you ole bloke! Ef ye don't, I'll yell."

The boy's words seemed to infuriate the huge ruffian. He seized the lad, hoarsely growling:

"Yer will, will yer? I'll choke ther life outen ye on ther spot!"

He surely would have choked Tom again in his fury, had not the third person interposed.

"Let up, you fool!" commanded a low, sharp voice. "Ef ye dare ter choke him erg'in I'll squawk myself. I hain't goin' ter see ther kid murdered. Let up!"

"Yer er reg'lar chicken, Jim," declared Big Bob; but, greatly to Tom's relief, the huge tramp did not choke him again.

The boy's eyes were now becoming accustomed to the semi-darkness, and he was able to discern two human forms close by. The one crouching by his side he knew as his former boss, Big Bob. The other was a rather small, slender fellow, but though Tom could see his face, he could not make out his features. However, he was sure that it was some one whom he had never before seen, evidently some new pal of Bob's.

While Tom was still rubbing his throat, the train started.

"Now we're off ag'in," observed the stranger, who had told Big Bob that his name was Jim Snap.

"Yes, but I thought we was goners w'en the chap opened the door. He'd 'a' spotted us sure ef he'd looked in."

"An' I thought we was in for it w'en ther kid skipped in."

"I didn't," chuckled Bob. "I knowed him soon's I got my lamps ontoer his runty little carcass, an' w'en thet door went shut, w'y I just had ter hold myself ter keep frum whoopin' out ov pure delight. I tell ye, Jim, this is a great piece ov luck fer me."

"Ye talk like ye thort ernuff ov ther kid" observed the small tramp; "but a few blessed seconds ago ye wanted ter strangle the wind outen him."

"Oh, I didn't mean ter shut off his wind fer good; I just wanted ter squeeze him till he'd 'member it er little."

"Wal, I guess ye've dun thet now."

"Ef he hain't then my mem'ry must be shorter than a bald-headed man's hair," observed Tom, speaking with some difficulty, as his throat still seemed "out of shape."

Big Bob uttered a hoarse chuckle.

"I kalkerlated ter wake ye up, you young snipe," he declared. "I've swore ter shake sum' sense inter ye. You dared ter run away, but I guess ye won't try it erg'in."

Tom said nothing aloud, but inwardly he thought:

"You're off there, ole man; I'll skip ye ther fu'st show I git."

The train was rapidly getting under way, and the roar of the wheels could be plainly heard by the three tramps. They now spoke in less guarded tones, for they knew that the noise would drown their voices so that they would not be heard by any trainmen passing overhead.

Tom's eyes slowly became accustomed to the gloom, and he surveyed Jim Snap with interest. Snap was a small man with a wrinkled, beardless face, sharp eyes, large mouth and red hair. Indeed the small tramp's mouth was so large and his voice so sharp that Tom mentally observed that "one didn't fit ther t'other." Snap was a restless, nervous fellow, who seemed incapable of sitting down and remaining quiet for five minutes at a time.

On the other hand, Big Bob was a slow, lazy, surly wretch. His broad face showed that he was the possessor of a superabundance of animal passions. His face was covered by a mass of stubby black beard, which extended too far up toward the eyes, and out of the midst of which protruded a large red nose that lopped to one side in a manner that plainly indicated it had once been broken. His eyes were set close together, and his entire appearance was far from pleasant.

"Bob," said Jim, "we'd orter fasten this side door."

"Dunno but ye'r' right," acknowledged the big tramp.

"Course I'm right. We've got ther end doors wedged so't ther critters can't git in, but ef they spot us, they'll come in at ther side next stop."

"Wal, you fasten both sides," commanded the lazy tramp.

Without grumbling, Jim Snap obeyed. He found some pieces of wood, which he fashioned into wedges, and had soon securely wedged both down, making it impossible for them to be easily opened.

"There," remarked the red-headed tramp, as he sat down with his back against the side of the car, uttering a sigh of satisfaction, "that is fixed. Now I'll take a smoke."

He produced a short black pipe, and was soon puffing away nervously. Big Bob had also placed his back against the side of the car, and he followed his companion's example by preparing to enjoy a smoke.

The boy watched them both for a few moments, then he sat up, remarking:

"You needn't think ye'r' goin' ter smoke me out. I smoke myself sometimes."

Then he produced his half-smoked cigar and, with a great flourish, proceeded to light it.

"You fellers kin hav' yer ole pipes," said the boy, between his puffs. "I'm smokin' ginoo-wine Collyrado Mydeeros nowadays. There hain't northin' too good fer my style."

Jim Snap laughed sharply.

"Wal, you're a cool chick," he grinned.

"I tolle yer so," observed Big Bob, with a touch of pride in his voice. "He's a fly yonker, an' he'd make a fu'st-rate dip."

"Ye'r' right," assented Jim, eagerly, "an' I'm just ther boy ter learn him ther biz."

Tom uttered a grunt of disgust.

"So thet's your lay, is it?" and he looked sharply at the red-headed tramp.

Jim nodded.

"You bet I'm way up in ther perfesh," he said, as if proud of the fact. "I've never been pulled but twicet, though I've been at it since I waz a little kid. But I'm pretty well spotted by ther flys an' flattys round Ther Hub, so I slid out fer other pastures."

"Just a common, sneakin' pickpocket," muttered Tom, disgustedly. "Say, Bob, ye'r' gittin' mighty ch'ice 'bout yer company, hain't ye?"

Big Bob did not reply, but Jim Snap leaped to his feet.

"You sassy little rat!" he piped, shrilly.

"W'at d'yer mean by thet?"

"Aw, sit down, cully," said Tom, waving his hand lazily, as he blew out a mass of smoke.

"I'll set down on you!"

"Then you'll probably git up mighty suddin. A tack is a bad thing ter set on."

For a moment the pickpocket was silent, then he sneered:

"I s'pose ye think ye'r' awful sharp."

"Ernuther pecoolarity ov ther hull Tack family; we're all sharp an' p'nted."

Big Bob chuckled lazily.

"I tolle ye, Jim," he said, with evident amusement. "He's ez cranky as ye please. 'Tain't no use ter chiu with him."

For a few minutes Jim Snap walked the car, then he came back and sat down. He had worked off his anger of a short time before, and he uttered a short laugh as he looked at Tom.

"You've got too much talk fer yer size," he asserted.

"Thet may be so," admitted the boy; "but one thing's sure—my v'ice fits mer mouth, an' yours don't. Thet orifice in yer face resembles ther entrance ov ther Hoosac Tunnel."

The red-headed tramp made no reply, and for some time the three smoked in silence. Tom held to his cigar as long as he could, and uttered a sigh of regret when finally compelled to throw it away.

The boy was in the habit of taking things coolly wherever he was, and he now lay down in one corner and prepared to enjoy a nap. He was soon asleep, and the roar of the wheels, shrieks from the locomotive, or other sounds did not arouse him. He knew not when they "side-tracked" to pass the Express, nor awoke when they moved on again.

Finally, he seemed to be awake, although he was unable to arise when he made the attempt. Plainly he heard the voices of Bob and Jim; both of whom were speaking in low tones.

"I tell ye, Jim, he's a treasure," said the low, gruff voice of the big tramp. "Ef I ever find my man, I'll make a big strike. He paid me big to put ther kid out ov ther way w'en he was a little rat. I swore I'd done ther job, but I wassen't killin' babies then. I kep' ther kid, fer I felt sure he'd pay me well sumtime."

"An' yer huntin' fer this man now?" inquired the sharp, yet guarded voice of Jim Snap.

"Yes; I've bin huntin' him fer years. Thet's w'at made me a tramp."

"But ef ye found him ye might not be able ter bluff him inter comin' down with ther stuff. He might say this warn't ther kid."

"Ef he tried that game, I've got a little paper that w'u'd cook his cabbage. Ther paper's w'uth more'n ther kid, but take 'em both together, they make a full hand."

Then came a sudden heavy knocking which aroused the sleeping lad. He sat up in the corner, and found that it was quite dark. He could see neither Bob nor Jim. The knocking continued at the end door.

"Are ye awake, Tom?" asked Big Bob, cautiously.

"Yes."

"Then keep still as a mouse."

The heavy knocking was followed by a volley of oaths from the man at the door.

"It's fastened," he said.

"Make the sneaking whelps open it," cried another man.

Then came the shouted command:

"Open this door!"

The boy knew by the darkness that evening had arrived, and he felt sure that they must be near Rockford.

"Open this door!" cried the voice again, and the order was followed by a perfect tattoo of knocks. "If you don't open it, we'll bu'st it open!"

Tom still sat quietly in the corner.

"Get a bar, Jack," he heard one of the trainmen say. "We'll rip open the door."

"They're cumin' in fer sure," whispered Jim Snap. "Oh, Lord! Wish I waz outen here."

"Ef ye've got vallybles, hide 'em," was Big Bob's advice. "They'll go through us."

The train was still moving along slowly over an up-grade.

The man who had gone to the engine for a bar soon returned, and once more the end door was vigorously attacked. Tom soon became aware that the men would have little trouble in getting into the car.

He was right. They soon were able to use the bar as a lever, and without great exertion wrenched open the little, sliding door.

Then one of them sprung through into the car, carrying a lantern on his arm.

Tom was still crouching in the corner near the door, and the train-hand did not notice him, but he at once pounced on Big Bob.

The Boy Tramp believed that his time had come. The open door was close at hand. He forgot the other trainman on the car without.

In a moment Tom arose to his feet and leaped up into the small open doorway. Swiftly he passed through, seized the brake rod and disappeared just as he heard Big Bob shout:

"Here, cum back, you infernal imp!"

Tom paid no heed to this command, but a moment later was on the top of the car.

"Hold on! hold on!" spluttered the astonished brakeman, as he saw the boy rise up before him in the gloom. "What are you up to?"

"I'm up ter snuff," was the lad's quick reply, as he eluded the man's grasp and ran along the top of the car.

"Stop!" cried the brakeman; "stop, or you'll fall between the cars."

But, Tom did not stop, and the man started in pursuit. Swiftly the boy ran along, watching closely so that he should not fall between the cars. He heard the man in pursuit cry out to him, and he muttered:

"Oh, ef ther train'd only stop now!"

But it did not. It had reached the top of a long grade and was beginning to gain speed.

"I must try it now," gritted the lad.

A moment later he went down between two cars. Clinging to the iron ladder, where a single slip meant death, he descended as swiftly as a cat might have done. In a moment he reached the bottom and clung there close to the grinding, roaring wheels.

The brakeman looked down at the dark form between the cars, and uttered a cry of horror. Then it seemed that the boy lost his hold and fell upon the track, under the groaning wheels. A long, exultant yell came from the engine, and the train rolled on through the gloom.

"Poor little devil!" gasped the horror-stricken brakeman. "That's the last of him!"

CHAPTER III.

TOM AND TILLY.

BUT the Boy Tramp had not been crushed by the car-wheels. When he let go his hold he swung himself outward and struck beyond the

iron rails. He was instantly thrown off his feet and went rolling down the steep bank.

When the train had passed on, the lad sat up and looked around in the darkness.

"Wonder ef I'm all here," he muttered, soberly. "I can't tell just now, fer I feel like my back was broke in nine places an' my liver was wrong end up. Guess ther hide's all rubbed offen my northeast ear, ef the whole blamed hearin'-organ hain't gone."

He had indeed been fortunate, for he was not injured in any manner further than a few bruises. The train was not moving rapidly when he leaped, or the result might have been different.

He arose and gazed toward the receding lights, which were vanishing in the distance.

"Ta, ta, Bobbie!" laughed the plucky boy. "I don't think you'll git yer forks onto me ag'in very soon. I've sworn off bummin' round with you, an' I'm boun' ter stick ter my word. I'm mighty hard ter catch, an' w'en ye git me I'm slippery's an eel."

"An' now, where'm I goin' ter bunk fer the night? Got ter find sum kind ov er hotel. I'm goin' ter turn in an' hav' er square night's sleep. It's just w'at I want, an' w'at I'm goin' ter hav'. Which way shall I turn?"

He was not long in deciding that question. He struck off across the fields toward the spot where he saw a light twinkling from a distant window.

"There's er dug-out ov sum kind," he observed.

The evening was mild, and a sweet-scented breeze was sweeping across the fields. To Tom's nostrils was borne the delicious fragrance of wild flowers and growing grass.

A half-mile's tramp brought him to a farmhouse, but as he approached the light vanished from the window. The farmer and his family had retired for the night.

"Don't believe I'll wake 'em 'less they've got a dawg," mused the young tramp. "I hain't goin' ter sling on too much style ter-night; a bed on ther hay-mow's good ernuff fer me."

There was no dog about the premises, and the boy easily obtained an entrance to the barn. Fifteen minutes later he was fast asleep on the hay-mow.

Tom slept soundly, and the next thing he knew he heard the farmer talking to his cattle in the morning. The boy knew that it was yet early, but the farmer was evidently an early riser.

"Now, if the old cove cum round here he'll be dead sure ter spot me, then I'd git fits. I've got ter slide fu'st chance."

Fortunately a good opportunity soon came, and he crept down from the mow and got out of the barn without being discovered.

With a light heart, Tom trudged along the country road. It was not yet sunrise, but the birds were pouring forth volumes of music. Chanticleer, from a distant farm, was crowing lustily, and away in another direction could be heard the bark of a faithful watch-dog.

"This is jolly!" muttered the lad, as he trudged along. "This is w'at ye call freedom. The country beats yer cities all holler."

After a time the boy began to consider the course he was pursuing. He desired to go to Rockford, and he might be traveling in an opposite direction.

At the next farm-house he turned up. The farmer was watering his cattle, and was a rough, surly old fellow. He answered Tom's questions shortly, and eyed the boy suspiciously all the time. Tom soon discovered that he was on the right road and going in the right direction, although twenty miles from Rockford. He was surprised to learn that the city was so far away, but he knew nothing of the stops and shifts that the train had made while he slept.

Bidding the farmer a polite good-morning, after thanking him for the information, and receiving a short grunt for an answer, the Boy Tramp once more started onward.

He resolved to try his luck at begging his breakfast, a thing which he had done hundreds of times. This he did, and for a time met with poor success.

Every one seemed in a surly mood, and two farmers refused to give him a bite, one of them threatening to set a big dog upon him if he didn't move along.

The forenoon was well advanced and the sun high in the heavens when Tom mounted a rickety fence that ran along beside a grass-grown road. The road led down a gentle hill to a wooded valley, through which ran a stream of water. Amid the trees at the foot of the hill the boy could see the roof of a small cottage. The

smoke which issued from the chimney plainly told that the little house was inhabited.

"Wal this hain't so jolly as it might be," muttered the lad on the fence. "I'm beginnin' ter be hungry in solid earnest. By gingerbread! I must git a bit ov sum kind just ter keep ther front side ov me frum growin' to ther backside."

"Wonder who lives down there in ther holler? P'raps I might chin 'em out ov sum bread-and-butter, or an old rusty doughnut, or suthin'—Hello! Who's this?"

Coming down the lane was a girl of about Tom's age, apparently. Her clothes were plain, yet neat, and her face was really pretty. She wore a big, wide-brimmed shade-hat, and carried a tin pail in her hand.

"My stars!" muttered the boy, admiringly. "She's just a cute little chick! P'raps she lives down there. I'll chin her an' git onto ther way ther lan' lays. I'll be able ter tell pretty near whether I kin git a snack ov suthin' by ther way she torks."

As the girl approached, she noticed the strange boy on the fence and looked at him curiously.

"Hello!" called Tom, when she was near enough. "Fine mornin', hain't it?"

The girl smiled and looked a little bashful, as she replied:

"Yes, sir."

"Hold on a minute," entreated Tom. "I want ter tork with ye. Do you live down there?" jerking his thumb toward the cottage.

"Yes, sir."

"By gracious!" thought the boy. "She's pretty's an'ile paintin' an' as perlite as you please. I kinder like her style."

Aloud he said:

"What's your name?"

"Tilly Day, sir."

Tom laughed a little.

"Don't call me 'sir,'" he entreated. "Nobody does that. I'm just the kid, or a rat, or a runt—that is, it's them or wuss. My name's Tom Tack; won't you call me Tom?"

The girl showed her white teeth in a smile and nodded.

"I s'pose yer folks live down there, don't they?" asked the boy, motioning toward the cottage.

"If you mean my father and mother, no. My uncle lives down there. I haven't any father or mother."

"Is that so?" exclaimed Tom. "Both dead?"

"I suppose so, though I don't know. There is something about it that Uncle Dave won't tell me. I don't remember even having any parents."

"By gingerbread!" burst from the boy's lips. "You an' I are pretty near in ther same box. I was born an orphing an' hav' staid so ever since."

She looked at him curiously, and he hastily added:

"I can't swear ter that, you know; but I don't hav' any reckerlecsun ov bein' born any other way, an' I hain't had no dad or marm since I kin'member."

The girl appeared interested. This fact pleased Tom immensely.

"How old is your uncle?" he asked.

"I don't know," was the frank reply. "He is quite old and is a cripple."

"Hoiety jinks!" thought Tom. "A cripple can't run very fast. Guess I'll hav' ter go down an' see Uncle Dave."

"What hav' ye got in the pail?" he asked.

"Some coffee and sugar for uncle. We had the last coffee for breakfast, and he wants it every meal."

"Breakfast," groaned the boy, "an' coffee! My stars! W'y I hain't had a bite ter-day. I'm as holler as a base-drum."

Tilly looked surprised and distressed.

"Nothing to eat!" she exclaimed. "Why, haven't you got anything at your house?"

"My house!" repeated Tom. "Why, Tilly; I hain't got no house. I'm a poor orphing, without a home."

"Well, you come with me," said the girl, earnestly. "I'll give you something to eat."

"I'm just your huckleberry!" cried Tom, as he slid down quickly from his perch on the fence.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WOUNDED MAN.

As Tom reached Tilly's side, a span of spirited horses, attached to a light driving carriage, came dashing up the road. In the carriage sat a middle-aged man, who was vigorously using a whip to urge the horses along. As the carriage

approached, Tom noticed that the man's lips were tightly set and his face very white. He spoke not a word, nor glanced to the right or left; in fact, he did not appear to notice the boy and girl by the roadside as the team swept past.

"Whew! Jiminy crickets!" exclaimed the Boy Tramp in a low tone, as he stared after the retreating carriage. "That old guy looked like sumpthin' war arter him with a picked stick. Who was he?"

"That is Silas Goodwin, who lives in the house on the hill away yonder. He is said to be very rich."

Tom gazed in the direction that Tilly pointed, and a smile curved his lips.

"Thet don't look much like a rich cove's house, Tilly," he observed. "I'll bet the old buildin's hain't seen paint fer twenty years. You'd orter see sum ov ther swell coves' shanties in Boston. I tell ye they sling on ther style."

"But Mr. Goodwin is very rich," persisted Tilly. "He is odd, and that is why he lives in that roomy old house instead of building him a nice, new mansion. He is a very strange man, and although he and Uncle Dave are friends, I am always afraid of him. I don't know why it is so."

"So he an' yer Uncle Dave are frien's, are they? Wal, that's just a bit pecooliar. Ther rich man on ther hill a-chummin' with ther poor man in ther holler. How long's this Goodwin lived there?"

"He was there when we came here. He has a little daughter about my age, but Mr. Goodwin won't let her have anything to do with me."

Tom gave vent to a long-drawn whistle.

"Ther plot thickens," he cried, striking a stage attitude; "ther mystery deepens; but, fear not, fair one! I will solve it or bu'st my b'iler!"

"What are you trying to act out?" laughed the girl.

"Oh, northin'," mumbled the Boy Tramp, as if a bit ashamed of himself. "I don't hav' such fits off'en, Tilly; so don't be skeered. Let's go down an' see yer unky, fer I feel an awful gone-ness here under my vest. I feel like I c'u'd create a famine in a bakery."

They started down the grassy road together. Teams seldom passed that way, as the road had lost its usefulness since the construction of a more practical route.

As they walked down the hill, Tom gallantly carrying the pail for his companion, they chatted gayly, and soon seemed well acquainted. Tom was highly pleased with Tilly's appearance; and the girl who had become interested in him in a sympathetic manner at first, rapidly grew familiar with the sharp-eyed, quick-tongued, jolly lad.

"By gracious, Tilly!" exclaimed the boy in a burst of enthusiasm; "I never did think much of girls, anyhow, but I like you!"

His manner was perfectly frank and open, and the girl felt little of her natural bashfulness in his presence. Quietly she replied:

"Thank you, Tom; I like you."

The cottage at the foot of the hill was surrounded with trees and bushes which almost concealed it from view from the road.

When the boy and girl could see the house they were surprised to see a man swiftly running from it. This person cast a glance over his shoulder and appeared quite frightened.

Tom seized Tilly by the arm.

"My Jinks!" he exclaimed, in an excited whisper. "What does this mean? That man is my ole boss, Big Bob!"

"Who is Big Bob?" asked the girl, appearing decidedly startled.

"He's a feller w'at claims that I belong ter him. I skipped him last night an' didn't suppose that ther big bloke waz within ten or fifteen miles ov here. He's a bad man, Tilly, an' he's bin up ter sum keno, mark my word."

"Oh, I hope he has not hurt Uncle Dave!"

She would have run forward, but Tom held fast to her arm.

"Hold on, Tilly," he cried, earnestly. "Wait till that cove gits outer sight an' I'll go with ye. I don't want him to see me."

Big Bob was not long in disappearing in the bushes; then the boy and girl went forward together. Tilly uttered an exclamation as soon as she saw the front of the cottage.

The door was standing wide open, and the man whom she called Uncle Dave was not sitting in his usual place near the doorway.

The girl ran forward and entered the cottage, Tom following closely. A cry burst from Tilly's lips as she saw a motionless form stretched on the floor near the center of the room. A single glance showed the girl that it was Uncle Dave.

"Great Jinks!" cried the Boy Tramp, as his eyes rested on the prostrate form. "Foul play!"

Tilly ran forward and knelt by the unconscious man's side, gazing into his face in search of some signs of life, and wringing her hands, while sobs of terror and excitement shook her.

"He's dead! he's dead!" she gasped, in a horrified way. "Dead! Oh-o!"

The keen-witted boy noticed that she uttered no words of affection, but, instead, seemed frightened and distressed by the unexpected death of a person whom she knew and had seen daily. Had she not already told him, he would not have inferred from her words as she knelt beside the unconscious man that he was her uncle.

In a moment the boy knelt by the unfortunate man's side. As he did so, he noticed a red stain on the man's coat near the left side, and without a moment's delay, the lad proceeded to investigate.

"He's bin stabbed!" cried Tom, with increasing excitement. "This looks like he'd had a dirty-mean racket played onter him."

"Is he really dead?" whispered Tilly.

"Dunno; I'll see."

Tom placed his hand over the wounded man's heart and remained silent for a moment. Then his face lit up with a look of pleasure.

"Dead—no!" he exclaimed. "He's w'u'th ten corpuses. But he orter hav' er pill-slinger fer we don't know how bad this cut is. How fur away duz ther nearest med'cine dispensor live? I'll go fur him."

"The nearest doctor lives at Eddington, six miles away."

"That's fur ernuff," muttered Tom; "but I'll fotch him."

At this instant the wounded man opened his eyes and stared blankly around, as if unable to comprehend what had occurred.

"Hello!" exclaimed Tom, in a low tone. "He's cumin' round."

Tilly uttered a little cry of joy.

"Oh, you are not killed, are you, Uncle Dave?"

For a moment or two the man only succeeded in uttering a low mumbling sound, then he seemed to suddenly gain control of his vocal organs.

"Wal, I guess not!" he growled, thickly. "That devil can't kill me so easy. I'll live ter pay him fer this, durned ef I don't!"

"Thet's it, ole man!" cried Tom, heartily. "Never say die, an' kick back w'en yer kicked."

The wounded man looked suspiciously at the boy for several seconds.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Me? Ho! I'm only just Tom Tack, a natural born orphing what hain't got no home. But I mus' be movin' ef I'm goin' fer ther man w'at makes business fer ther undertaker."

"What's that?" sharply.

"I sed I'd hev ter be skippin' fer ther doctor."

"W'at d'y'e want ov him?"

"I'm goin' ter git him fer you."

"Wal, ve. hain't."

Dave Day spoke in a decided tone, and, much to Tom's surprise, the old man arose. He was on his feet ere the boy could render any assistance, and with some difficulty, he hobbed to a bed in the corner of the room, where he sunk down with evident weakness.

"Ye won't git no doctor fer me!" he declared with savage energy. "W'en I want one ov ther infarnal critters I'll say so."

"Sumtimes er man wants one w'ust w'en he can't say so," observed Tom. "You've got a bad cut in yer side there, an' orter hav' it look ed arter in style."

"Style be blowed!" exclaimed Uncle Dave, with a snarl. "Who tolle you ter cum in here an' take charge o' this ranch? You git out!"

"Not till I know how bad ye'r cut," assured the boy, firmly. "Ef you won't hav' er doctor, that's all right; but I'm goin' ter know whether that knife went through yer heart or liver. I'm sumwhat interested in ther science ov carvin', myself."

Uncle Dave made no reply, for he seemed to be suddenly seized with a feeling of faintness. He closed his eyes and lay back on the bed, looking white and ghastly.

When the wounded man opened his eyes again, he found Tilly bathing his forehead, while Tom was busily engaged in dressing the wound. The boy did his part of the work in a really admirable manner. He smiled encouragingly when the unfortunate man opened his eyes.

"Tain't bad a'tall," declared the lad, pleasantly. "Ther cut don't 'mount ter nothin'. Guess 'twas ther crack on ther head what put ye to sleep. There's er bump on the northwest slope ov yer cabeza that's bigger'n all three ov

ther 'Gyptian Pyramids. It waz a reg'lar socker!"

"He hit me with my own crutch," groaned the wounded man.

"Thet put ther crutch hoss de come back," asserted Tom.

"What?"

"I say that knocked out ther crutch—bruck it plum in two. There it lays on ther floor."

Tom pointed at the broken crutch, and Dave uttered something which sounded strangely like a round oath.

"He shall pay fer this!" was Dave's assertion.

"Thet's right, ole man; charge him interest. But, who waz it that dun ther job?"

"Ther w'u'st critter unhung! He foun' me here alone an' he tuck an advantage o' my lameness. He meant ter down me fer good, an' w'y he didn't finish ther job arter knockin' me senseless is w'at gits me."

"Do you know him?"

"Wal, I sh'u'd shout! Know 'im! I know his record frum A ter izzard."

"You know his name?"

"I know his names," asserted Uncle Dave, "an' he's had scores o' 'em."

"Who is he?"

Dave looked at the boy suspiciously.

"Seem's ter me ye'r mighty interested," he growled. "I don't know why I sh'u'd tell you."

"Oh, ye kin do as ye please 'bout that," smiled Tom. "I only thort p'raps ye might want ther stobber brought ter incarceration. Ef ye do, I'm just ther man ter tackle ther job."

"You!—ye'r only a boy!"

"Thet don't make no difference. I know that I'm cut fer a detective. I feel within me that ungraspable sumthin' what tells me I kin run to his lair the red-handed, crime-stained wretch as sought ter put an end ter a noble life. Ther maw ov justice—"

"Oh, dry up!" exclaimed Dave, in disgust. "You make me tired!"

Unconsciously Tom had fallen into a stage attitude, with his clinched right hand upraised. When interrupted by Dave, he remained in that position for a moment, gazing resentfully at the old man. Then he lowered his hand, muttering:

"Thet settles it!"

"When Dave's wound was attended to and his bruised head bathed until it felt better, the unfortunate man said, not unkindly:

"There, yonkers, I'm all right now. You skip; I want ter think."

As they moved away, Tom found an opportunity to whisper in Tilly's ear:

"My kingdom for a doughnut!"

The girl motioned for him to go out.

"I will bring you something," she said, in a low tone.

Tom went out, and was soon joined by the girl, whose hands were filled with buttered bread, cookies and doughnuts.

Tom struck an attitude.

"She comes!" he proclaimed, dramatically. "She comes like a ministerin' angel! Le's hav' ther chuck, Tilly."

She laughed at his odd manner.

"Here is all I could bring."

"I'll make this look sick mighty sudden," and the lad began to eat greedily. "Is this sum ov your cookin' Tilly?"

She acknowledged that it was.

"Wal," observed Tom, "it looks good, smells good an' tastes good. Tilly, you're a screamer!"

She blushed and looked confused.

"You've never heard me scream," she asserted.

"Oh, wal, I didn't mean that. I mean that you're a howler."

"I'd like to know what the difference is," she said, slowly, feeling a trifle hurt.

"Hang it all!" spluttered Tom, growing confused himself. "There's a dit ov difference, but I guess I'd orter se'd you's a bu'ster. That means just a reg'lar ole sky-scrapers."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"By gingerbread!" groaned the boy. "I allus thort I knew how ter tork United States, but I guess I don't."

But he finally succeeded in making her understand that he considered her an excellent cook.

When Tom had eaten the food, he stood before her and said:

"Tilly, I'm goin' ter turn detective."

"What's that?"

"A detective is ther biggest gun out," was the boy's assertion.

"Oh, it's a gun!"

Tom laughed.

"No, it's a man, an' he's a loud one. He's allus as sharp as a brad-awl an' smart as chain-lightnin'. He's a feller w'at hunts down gory-handed criminals an' all kinds ov crooks. He's

ther sleuth-houn' ov justice, an' he never sleeps. I tell you he's a terror!"

"And you are going to become such a horrid thing, Tom?"

"Tain't horrid, Tilly! Now you listen. Sum-buddy tried ter massacree yer Uncle Dave. They meant ter lay him out fer keeps, but fer sum reason they didn't—they made a big slip-up. But, strange ter relate, w'en yer Uncle Dave gets ther bug outer his hair an' kems back ter consciousness, he won't tell who tried ter salivate him. He knows who dun it—an' ole foe—but he won't tell. Here's a dark an' turrible mystery!"

The boy again struck an attitude, and spoke in a tone which riveted his hearer's attention.

"Tilly," he continued, "ther sardine what shattered ther ole man's crutch must be brought ter justice. He must not escape ther clutch ov ther law. He must be brought up with a round turn, a full turn, and a turn all together; an' I'm just ther kid ter interjuce him ter that kind ov a turnover. From this hour he shall know no peace until he is made acquainted with a piece ov rope that fits his neck. If he don't git that, he'll git more'n thirty days. Tilly, you behold before you a genooin, double-an'-twisted, all-wool an' a yard wide detective—that's me!"

CHAPTER V.

TOM FINDS A HOME.

TILLY was greatly impressed by Tom's words, but she could not repress a smile at his quaint language and stage-struck manner. Suddenly the boy grew serious.

"Tilly," said he, "do you reckerlec' that we saw a man skinnin' away from ther cabin as we came through the bushes there?"

The girl nodded.

"He's my mutton," was the lad's assertion. "Thet cove waz Big Bob, ther sardine w'at says he's my boss, an' he knows suthin' 'bout this shindig."

"Do you think he tried to kill Uncle Dave?"

"Wal, I guess he'd do a job like that ef he took a notion. He hain't too good."

"And you have always lived with such a man?"

"Ever since I 'member, till I run away—give him ther big skip."

"Does he carry a knife?"

"Wal, you bet, an' a big revolver, too. Oh, he's a bad boy ter tackle!"

The girl turned pale and moved nearer her companion, as if for protection.

"Tom," she said, falteringly, "I wish you wouldn't go away."

He looked surprised.

"Why not, Tilly?"

"Because I am afraid," she replied, suddenly lifting her head and looking him frankly in the eyes. "I am afraid to stay here with Uncle Dave now."

"What are you skeered ov?"

"That dreadful man may come back and kill us both. Please don't go away, Tom!"

He looked at her steadily for several moments.

"Tilly," he finally said, "does Uncle Dave allus treat you fu'st class? Hain't he never cross?"

"Sometimes."

"What does he do?"

"He scolds."

"Is that ther w'u'st?"

"Sometimes he punishes me."

"You mean that he licks ye?" said the boy, his eyes flashing a little.

She nodded.

"W'at for?"

"For 'most anything when he takes a notion. Sometimes he punishes me for nothing at all."

"Oh, he does, does he? Does he use a stick?"

"Often."

"Wal, that's tuff. I can't think much ov er critter as whips girls fer northin'."

Tilly looked alarmed.

"But you will stay?" she cried. "You won't go away because Uncle Dave is cross?"

"P'raps I'll hang roun' er while," answered the boy. "He won't be apt ter crawl outen his bunk fer a day or two. He an' I w'u'dn't git erlong very well if he tried ter lick you while I waz roun'." I'd be pretty apt ter jump him."

"Oh, I'm glad you will stay!" cried Tilly, joyously.

"I intended ter hang roun' in this neighborhood fer a time," Tom confessed. "Fact is, I've got interested here. I've struck a bloomin' mystery, an' if there's anythin' as I do like it's er mystery."

"I think I can make it all right with Uncle Dave."

"I don't keer nuthin' 'bout yer Uncle Dave."

Guess there won't be no trouble with *him*—fer a fac', I'm pretty sure there won't, right away, 'cause he hain't goin' ter be able ter prowl roun' fer a day or two. That little jab in his side'll keep him quiet."

And so it was settled that Tom should remain there for a time.

When they entered the cottage they discovered that Dave Day had fallen asleep, and were careful not to arouse him. Tom found plenty of time to chat with Tilly, and was not long in learning that she had attended school at the country school-house, a mile away, and was fairly well informed for a girl of her ago. The boy said nothing about his own education, for he was quite ashamed of the fact that he had no knowledge of books.

But Tom Tack was not an ignoramus. Although he had never attended school he was a keen observer, and had a greater practical knowledge of men and the world at large than many intelligent persons with gray hairs. His sharp eyes were always taking in his surroundings, and he had a memory that was simply wonderful.

Dave Day slept soundly for a long time, during which Tom amused Tilly by relating anecdotes of his wandering life. The lad's brain was well stored with interesting stories, and he knew how to relate everything in a quaint and amusing manner, although he sometimes confused his hearer by an excessive use of slang.

When the wounded man finally awoke, he found himself alone; but the door was open and the sound of a merry, girlish laugh came to his ears. He glanced at the little round clock, which stood close to where his blackened pipe lay on a little shelf, and observed that noon-time was past.

A moment later Tilly was startled by hearing her name loudly called.

"It's Uncle Dave," she said. "He has awakened and probably wants his dinner. I must attend to him at once. Will you come in?"

"Don't keer ef I do," assented the Boy Tramp, and he followed the girl into the cottage.

The wounded man had made no attempt to get off the bed upon which he lay, and there was a helplessness in his manner which, however, was not apparent in the words with which he greeted Tilly.

"What yer been doin', you lazy jade?" he snarled. "Don't ye see it's long past grub-time? You hustle now an' git me sum coffee, ur I'll warm ye!"

"I did not know it was so late, Uncle Dave; and you were sleeping, so that I could do nothing without awaking you."

"Dry up, an' git ther coffee!" snapped the irritable old fellow.

"Guess thet tap on the *cabeza* kinder bu'sted yer temper, ole man," observed Tom, as he came forward and seated himself on a rickety chair.

Dave looked at him savagely.

"What are you hangin', roun' here fer?" he demanded. "Didn't I tell ye ter git?"

"I guess ye did," admitted Tom, coolly; "but I warn't goin' ter leave ye, ter be wiped out by thet ole sardine, Big Bob."

"Who's Big Bob?"

"He's thet feller w'at jabbed ye with a sticker an' knocked ye silly with yer own crutch. Oh, I know him!"

For a moment Dave stared at the lad in silence, then he started up on one elbow, and pointing to the door, fairly thundered:

"YOU—GIT—OUT!"

Tilly, who was starting the fire in the old cook-stove, looked frightened, but Tom simply lay back in his chair, and smiled quietly as he crossed his legs, saying with a lazy drawl:

"Don't crowd the oxen, uncle. You're in too much ov er rush. I'll vanish like a dewdrop afore the sun w'en I see ye climbin' offen thet bed."

Old Dave made a move to get up, but, as the boy had thought, the exertion was more than he could stand. He sunk back, moaning bitterly:

"Oh, my head, and this blamed side!"

In a moment Tom was by the bedside.

"Ef I kin do anythin' fer ye, uncle, you jest say so," he said, earnestly.

But Dave made no reply.

Tilly soon had some victuals on the table, and a pot of delicious-smelling coffee trembling on the stove. Tom watched her swift, deft movements with interest and admiration. Finally, Tilly turned out the coffee, and everything was ready. Timidly she approached the bed where the wounded man lay.

"Dinner is ready, Uncle Dave," she said.

"Shall I bring you what you want?"

"I guess ye'd better," admitted the man. "I

did not know just how bad I waz used up afore."

With Tom's aid, he was bolstered up by pillows, then Tilly brought him food and a cup of coffee. He did not eat much, but he drank the coffee with evident relish. When he announced that he had enough, the girl removed the remnants. Then she made a covert motion to Tom, and the lad sat down at the table as quietly as if he belonged there. Dave Day watched him closely, but said nothing.

Despite the fact that Tom had eaten at about the middle of the forenoon, he made a hearty meal. The food was good, and the coffee delicious.

When the meal was finished, Tom found Dave's pipe and lighted it for the old man, who, with a grunt, accepted it from the boy. Tom was confident that the wounded man was trying to think of some manner of punishing him for remaining when ordered away. But, this did not trouble the lad at all. He resolved to keep his eyes open while Dave was confined to the bed, and to vanish as soon as the man was able to remain up.

Tom made himself useful by aiding Tilly in clearing away the dishes, after which he removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves.

"What are you going to do, Tom?" asked the girl.

"I'm goin' to help ye wash ther dishes, Tilly," was the reply. "I'm a dandy w'en it cum to thet kiud ov business."

Dave Day was watching the boy closely, and he noticed that Tom's arms were round and white. Suddenly the old man uttered a vehement exclamation.

"Boy, cum here!" he cried, excitedly.

"W'at's ther row, now?" demanded Tom, promptly.

"Cum here!" repeated the wounded man, who half arose upon the bed, looking eager and excited. "W'at's that mark on yer arm?"

Tom approached the bed suspiciously, for he was on the outlook for a trick of some kind.

"Them?" he said, pointing to some blue marks upon the thick of his arm; "them's letters."

"Letters?" replied Dave. "How long have they been there?"

"Ever since I kin 'member."

"Here, let me look. I won't hurt ye."

Before Tom could escape his grasp, Dave had seized him by the arm. Eagerly the wounded man scanned the tattooed arm of the Boy Tramp, and a cry of delight broke from his lips.

"By Jupiter, here's luck!" exclaimed Dave. "Boy, who are ye?"

"I'm just Tom Tack, a born orphirg," was the reply. "Never had no dad ner marm."

"Tom Tack?" repeated the wounded man.

"Was Tack yer parents' name?"

"Tell ye I never had no parents!" returned Tom, with some vehemence. "Never had nothin', only jest a boss, an' a mighty mean one at that."

For at least twenty minutes the wounded man questioned the lad closely concerning his life and his companions. Tom told a very straight story, and Dave seemed greatly pleased. The man finally said:

"Ye've had ev hard life, Tommy; but ye needn't kick roun' any more. I kinder like ye, an' I notice ye'r mighty handy roun' ther house. You jest stay right here, my boy, an' this shell be yer home. I need a boy like you. Will ye stay?"

Tom was amazed, but he slowly replied:

"I'll see 'bout it. P'raps I will, but if I do, there won't be no lickin' girls or boys roun' this ranch—mind *that*!"

And Dave hastened to say:

"Oh, no, no, no, Tommy! No, indeed! Certainly not! Everythin' shall be as pleasant as you please, Tommy."

CHAPTER VI.

JIM SNAP TAKES A BATH.

"I'm so glad!" exclaimed Tilly, in a joyous way, when the work within the cottage was done, and she and Tom had passed outside.

"You are going to be my brother now!"

"This gits me!" admitted Tom. "Never knew them letters on my arm 'mounted ter anythin' afore. Guess they waz pricked inter ther skin with Ingry ink w'en I waz a little squawker."

"Let me look at them again, Tom. What are the letters?"

"Here they are," and he pushed np his sleeves. "I don't know much 'bout letters an' readin', but I learned that them are 'C. E. G.' W'at they mean is more'n I kin tell."

"They may be the initials of a name, Tom."

"I've thort ov thet, Tilly. But, whose name?"

"I don't know; surely not yours."

"I ain't so sure ov thet," soberly said the boy. "Them may be ther fu'st letters ov my real name. I don't believe my name's Tom Tack—that is, mer right name."

She looked at him with interest, but did not venture an opinion.

"All I've got fer proof thet my name's Tom Tack is thet Big Bob said so. He didn't pur- tend thet his name was Tack, nor did I ever find out just w'at it really is. P'raps I'm sum stolen kid w'at's heir ter a millyon."

Tilly smiled.

"Oh, Tom, if it were really so!"

"But 'tain't, Tilly," he declared. "No such luck. Kinder guess them letters stand fer my real name jest ther same. Ef thet last one fitted, instead of bein' a G, I'd claim thet I waz ther lost Charley Ross."

"Tom," said the girl, impressively, "I believe you will turn out to be a big man's son!"

"No, 'tain't natteral, Tilly," was the quick retort. "I'm too small merself."

"I didn't mean that. I meant that your fa-ther would prove to be rich or noble."

"Hope so, merself! By gingerbread, if it did prove so, I wouldn't fergit you, Tilly. But whichever way it may be, I'm satesfied that yer Uncle Dave knows suthin' 'bout me. He didn't change his tune so mighty sudden fer nothin'!"

"He did act strangely," admitted the girl. "I never knew Uncle Dave to be so good-natured before; and he didn't seem to like you a bit at first."

"He liked me as well then as he does now. The old rat's playin' sum kind ov a game fer ther benefit ov hisself. Don't know jest w'at his racket is, but he can't wool me. I'm up ter snuff, you bet."

"I'm afraid you are right, Tom; but you won't go away now, will you?"

"Oh, no; I hain't goin' ter skip these parts very suddin'. I've struck good feed an' er better place ter bunk than I've had since I dunno w'en. Then there's this here mystery ter clear up. Sumhow I'm gittin' tangled up in the mystery merself. If I only had that paper now I'd git you ter read it."

"What paper?"

"Oh, a dockymint all kivered with hen's tracks w'at Big Bob kerrys roun' with him. Et berlongs ter me—I know et does. I saw it onc't, but I can't read 'ritin', fer I never had no chance ter learn."

Tilly was growing more and more interested.

"Perhaps it was something that would reveal who you are."

"Thet's w'at I think. Big Bob allus hung ter that paper like grim death ter a defunked niger. Ef I c'u'd only git my forks onto it!"

They found a shady spot and sat down. For a long time they talked earnestly. Finally Tom arose, saying:

"I'm goin' ter look in there, Tilly, an' see w'at yer unky's doin'."

He crept to the open cabin door and peered in. Old Dave was lying on the bed, gazing at the ceiling, and chuckling as if highly pleased. Suddenly he burst out talking to himself.

"By Gideon, ole man, ye'r lucky!" he muttered loud enough for the boy to hear. "You've got ther ole cuss foul erg'in. Ho! ho! ho! He's got sick uv bein' bled, has he? I can't prove mer claim, kin I? Wal, we'll see 'bout thet. I reckon mer proof afore waz kinder slim, but I've got ernuff o' et now. Thet boy's w'u't thousan's ter me! I'll pull mighty hard on ther ole skunk's puss."

"Ho! ho! He! he! I'm er tuff nut ter down—I'm er rayther hard critter ter snuff out. Just w'en ther ole sallymander thinks I'm fixed, he'll find I'm erlive an' kickin'. It's er mighty cold day w'en ther ole man gits left. Ther proof is onto ther kid's arm; reckon thet'll count BIG! Oh-ho! I've got a double grip onto him now—a double-an'-twisted grip. Ho! ho! ho!"

Tom moved away from the door and returned to Tilly's side.

"Yer unky seems ter be 'joyin' hisself huge-ly," observed the lad, with a queer smile.

When the boy and girl re-entered the cottage, the wounded man called Tom to his side.

"Sot down, Tommy!" said old Dave, blandly, making an attempt to smile. "Make yerself comfortable. I want ter tork with ye."

Tom sat down near the bedside, and the old man again questioned him concerning his past life. Evidently he wished to learn if Tom had told him the truth, the first time. To Dave's

amazement, the boy told an altogether different story, which in no way agreed with the one he had first related. The wounded man was amazed and angered.

"W'y, you infarnal lyin' little rat!" he snarled. "W'at d'yer mean? Afore ye sed ye never had no parents; now ye say yer father waz a Wall street broker, an' yer mother waz one o' ther high bloods frum Virginny. You truth-twistin' little imp! I'd wring yer neck ef I c'u'd git my han's onter it!"

"It's er lucky thing fer me that ye can't git 'em onter it, then," observed the boy, with a grin. "Ye don't luv me as much as ye did, do ye?"

In a moment the old fellow saw that he had betrayed himself, and with an effort, he banished the look of rage and reassumed the mask of good-nature.

"Oh, ye mustn't think northin' o' that, Tommy," he mumbled, half-apologetically. "I didn't mean northin' by it—sart'in I didn't. I'm tooken that way onc't in er wile, but I don't mean no more'n you did w'en ye tole that yarn 'bout yer folks. You didn't mean northin', did ye now?"

But, Tom was not so ready to "back water," and as a result he soon had Dave in a decidedly perplexed and angered condition, although the old man refrained from giving way to another outburst of wrath. He believed that the boy was purposely tantalizing him.

The afternoon passed away and evening came. Tom and Tilly enjoyed a pleasant supper, while Dave again took his food on the bed. After the supper-table was cleared away, Tom lighted Dave's pipe and passed it to the old man, who enjoyed a smoke, while the boy and girl chatted pleasantly.

The keen eyes of the Boy Tramp noted that, although the house was meagerly furnished, everything was neat and clean. Even the old, dilapidated stove, that had not seen polish for a dog's age, was scrupulously clean and the little lamp which stood on the table gave a fairly good light, for the reason that the chimney had been cleaned and polished till it was as bright as a new silver dollar.

Suddenly Dave Day uttered a cry and started up in his bed, shaking his fist toward the window in a savage manner.

"I'm a hard man ter down, you treacherous, whelp!" he shouted.

Tom wheeled quickly and was just in time to see a human face vanish from the window.

"Ho! ho!" laughed Dave. "He cum back ter see w'at about ther corpus, an' he foun' ther corpus kickin'."

Tom had not looked toward the window quick enough to get a fair view of the spy's face, and he ventured to ask:

"Who was it?"

"Ther ole sallymander as tried ter give me mer last sickness," was Dave's reply.

"Oh, Tom!" exclaimed Tilly, in a terrified whisper. "He'll come and murder us all."

"Don't ye be 'fraid ov that little one," said the Boy Tramp, reassuringly. "We'll watch out for him."

That night, ere they closed their eyes in slumber, Tom barricaded the door and fastened the windows.

"He won't git in without raisin' a rumpus, an' we'll be ready ter receive 'im," Tom observed.

"He'll be apt ter git a dose outer this ef he does cum," observed Dave, as he displayed an old revolver, which he seemed to bring forth from among the bedclothes.

Tom assisted Dave to get up and sit in a chair while Tilly made the bed; then after she had retired, the boy made himself useful in aiding the old man to remove his clothes and crawl in between the clean sheets. Dave would not have the wound in his side touched or examined, as he said it would only be worse.

Tom made his bed on the floor where he would be ready to spring up in a moment at the slightest alarm. Then he lay down and slept soundly till morning, nothing occurring to arouse him.

The next day the Boy Tramp took a stroll and his idle steps led him in view of Silas Goodwin's roomy, old-fashioned residence. For some reason unknown to himself, he was interested in the strange man whom he had first seen wearing a very white face and lashing his horses into a furious run.

"So, this Silas Goodwin's friendly with ole Dave Day, is he? An' Dave Day knows suthin' 'bout my past hist'ry? Wonder ef this Silas Goodwin 'n I are connected in enny way? I'd like ter inspec' ther inside ov that big ole house. P'raps I may hav' er chance sumtime."

On his return, Tom entered the wooded valley some distance down the stream from Dave Day's

cottage. Slowly he walked along up the stream, thinking deeply.

Suddenly he heard a sharp cry for help. In an instant he was aroused, and, as the cry was repeated, he dashed forward, having recognized the voice as Tilly's.

In a few seconds he came in view of a scene which caused his blood to boil with indignation. First he caught a glimpse of Tilly's pink dress; then he saw that she was struggling desperately in the grasp of a man.

And that man was Jim Snap!

The little red-headed tramp was doing his best to kiss the pretty girl whom he had found wandering in the wood. They were close to the stream where the water was quite deep.

"Let me go!" cried the frightened girl. "Let me go, sir! Help! help!"

"Hang ye! I'll kiss ye er bu'st," gritted Jim.

At that moment, the girl succeeded in breaking away from him. The next instant Jim Snap received a severe shock and felt himself flying through the air. He struck sprawling in the stream, and immediately began to kick and splash in a furious manner, bawling loudly for some one to pull him out.

"Hello, there!" cried Tom, who had tumbled the little tramp into the water; "takin' a bath, Jimmy?"

"Help!" gurgled the frightened vagabond. "I'm drownin'!"

"Oh, no ye hain't," asserted Tom. "The water hain't morn'n three fut deep. Just stan' up an' ye will be all right."

Snap did as directed, and discovered that Tom had told him the truth.

"Dad blast ye!" piped the shrill-voiced tramp, shaking his fist at the boy, "I'll pay ye fer this!"

"I don't charge a cent, Jimmy," laughed Tom. "Ye'r' welcome ter go in bathin' in this brook w'en ye want ter. Sorry I hain't got time ter watch ye dive an' swim roun', but, business calls me erway. Ta, ta, Jimmy!"

Then he hurried to overtake Tilly, who was waiting for him a short distance away.

CHAPTER VII.

BENEATH THE OPEN WINDOW.

"Oh, Tom!" cried the girl, "you came just in time. That dreadful man sprung out of the bushes and seized me as I was passing. He nearly frightened me to death."

"The red-headed little scamp!" exclaimed Tom. "But he got a jolly good coolin' off. We'd better be movin' though, fer Jimmy may want ter punch my head w'en he gits out. He's little—but, oh, my!"

The boy glanced back, to see the little tramp slowly wading out of the water; then they hurried onward.

"Gingerbread!" laughed the Boy Tramp. "W'at a s'prise that must 'a' bin fur Jimmy! Don't believe he's tooken a bath afore fer a good time. My eyes! but he waz just hoppin' mad!"

Tilly was still trembling from her recent excitement, and she clung to her companion's arm as they hurried up the stream toward the cottage. She feared that the discomfited tramp would pursue them, and continued to cast apprehensive glances over her shoulder.

"Who is he, Tom?" she asked.

"He's er new chum ov Big Bob's, an' he's a 'tarnal quick-tempered little rat. He looked comical w'en he stood up in ther water all dripin' an' shook his fist at me. Guess he'd like ter got his forks onter er kid ov 'bout my size just then."

"I'm afraid he will follow us."

"Guess not. But w'at was he tryin' ter act out?"

Tilly blushed and looked indignant.

"He was trying to—to kiss me," she stammered.

"By gracious! I admire his taste," declared Tom.

She looked at him reproachfully.

"You don't mean that you think he did right in springing out and seizing me as he did?—the horrid wretch!" and her eyes flashed.

"No, not just that," admitted the boy, slowly. "But, if he waz goin' ter jump out an' grab any one, I don't guess he c'u'd hav' made a better ch'ice."

And then, as he saw that she took his words in a serious manner, he cried, laughingly:

"It's all a joke, Tilly; though I guess it's a mighty poor one."

She looked up and smiled.

"You are so odd and different from other boys whom I have seen, that I don't know what to think of you," she admitted.

"Think anything yer like, so long as ye don't think bad ov me," he said, seriously.

They finally approached the cottage, and to Tilly's surprise the door was closed. She had left it open when she wandered away from the cottage a short time before.

"Stop, Tom!" she exclaimed, clutching him by the arm. "There is something wrong!"

"What do you mean?"

"See, the door is closed. It was open when I left the house. Uncle Dave did not close it."

"P'raps he's got a vis'ter," said the boy, grimly.

"Oh, if that dreadful man has come back!" gasped Tilly, in an agony of fear. "He will murder us all!"

"Not much he won't. Don't you git skeered. There's an open winder, an' I'm goin' ter peek in. You stay here, fer I may git cotched."

Cautiously Tom glided forward. Suddenly the sound of excited voices came to his ears. Dave Day indeed had a visitor.

Tom paused in an undecided manner for a moment. He could hear Dave swearing furiously.

"I'm goin' ter look in," was the lad's decision.

He darted swiftly forward in a crouching position and was soon under the open window. He did not have to look in to discover who Dave Day's visitor was.

"Big Bob, by jingo!" he whispered.

It was indeed the boy's old boss who had called on Dave Day.

"You miser'ble ole traitor!" Big Bob was saying. "So ye hain't dead, are ye? Wal, ye'd orter bin under ther sed long ergo, an' ye w'uld 'a' bin ef one ov ther band had got his dukes onter ye. We all swore ter knife ye, an' I thort w'en I foun' ye layin' on yer back in ther middle ov ther floor here yesterday as sum ov ther boys had foun' ye an' guv ye yer las' sickness."

"An' so you waz here yesterday, waz ye?" questioned Dave, in a snarling tone. "Ye waz here arter that skunk laid me out, waz ye? W'y didn't ye see ef I had shuffled out?"

"Wal, I waz goin' ter see how bad ye waz stuck w'en I heerd y'ices clost by. You bet yer boots I didn't want ter be cotched here with a corpus, an' so I sloped. I counted you ye'd croaked fer sart'in."

"Wal, I hain't, an' I'm good fer ther devil w'at guv me ther knife. I'm er hard man ter down."

"Yer er reg'lar durned two-faced traitor, an' ef ther ole band waz in existence, I'd feel it my relig'us dooty ter knife ye myself. But ther band's bu'st. Most ov ther boys are planted, an' they died like men with their boots on. Ther cap'n he skun out an cum East. He struck a fat snap an' worked et fur all et waz w'uth. I helped him a little, but ther durned skunk guv me ther slip, an' I lost my pie. I've bin huntin' fer him fer ther las' seven or eight y'ars."

"An' ye hain't foun' 'im?" questioned Dave, eagerly.

"Nop; but I will."

"W'at kinder grip ye got onter ther cap'n?"

"Wal, I did hav' er boy what I guess he'd wish waz under ther sod. Anyhow he guy me five hundred ter put ther kid outer ther way w'en he waz er leetle shaver."

"An' you didn't do it?"

"Nary. I tolle him I did, but I kep' ther kid, knowin' that I'd hav' er big holt onter him by doin' so."

"Where is ther kid now?"

"Dead, I guess. Ther blamed fool run away frum me, but I cotched him night afore las'. Ther waz on ther arternoon Freight fer Rockford. I waz stealin' er ride in an empty box w'en ther kid jumped right in. I froze ter 'im, but afore we got ter Rockford, ther train fellers got onter us an' kem in. Ther boy skipped an' run, an' one ov ther men sed he fell right under ther wheels. They never stopped ther train, though, fer he waz northin' but er tramp an' they waz ahind time."

Tom chuckled to himself.

"By gingerbread!" he muttered. "Bob thinks I'm er goner. Hope he'll keep on thinkin' so, but I'll bet er lead nickel ole Dave'll give the whole thing erway."

But Dave didn't.

"So ye lost yer grip onter ther cap'n?" questioned the cripple.

"Not much. Ther boy waz er good thing, but I've got er better here. This here paper's wu'th more'n ten boys."

"W'at's that?"

"I'll never tell you," replied Big Bob, quietly. "It's su'thin' as ther cap'n'd give er small forchune ter git his forks onter."

"How did you come by et?"

"Oh, I nicked it."

"When?"

"Oh, I got er good show onc't w'en I went ter see 'im on business. Thet waz jest afore he skipped, an' ther loss ov ther paper skeered him, I guess. Dunno w'at ther blamed fool kep' ther dockymint fer anyhow."

"Let's see it."

"Not much ye don't! I know ye ov old, an' I hain't trustin' ye. Ye'r' er reg'lar, natter-born traitor. Ye went back onter ther band."

"W'en er durned officer had me foul, an' I waz 'bliged ter."

"Ye guv ther rest ov us erway ter save yer own neck; but, lucky fer us, we got onter ther whole business an' sloped. Ef 'tadn't bin fur ther, I reckon I'd bin ahind bars now."

"Wal, ye needn't show ther ole paper ef ye don't want to," growled Dave, attempting to turn Bob's mind from the past, to which the cripple liked no reference.

"Thet advice is wasted, ole man," was Big Bob's quiet retort. "I sh'u'dn't 'a' dun ther anyhow."

"How kem ye here?"

"Oh, I drapped roun' this way s'archin' fer ther kid an' ther cap'n."

"Wal, ther kid won't be ov any further use ter ye now, an' I don't believe ye'll spot ther cap'n roun' these parts. You'd better be movin'."

"Oho, I had, hey? Kinder want me ter skin out, hey?"

"I don't keer w'at ye do, only I don't want ter see any more ov ye. You an' I can't hitch hoses."

"Dunno 'bout that. Ye've got er purty cumfertable shanty here; it'd be er right good chance ter hang out fer er week or so."

"I tell ye I won't hav' ye hangin' 'roun'," cried Dave, angrily. "I've seen ernuff o' ye ter last ther rest o' mer lifetime."

At this moment, Tom felt a light hand on his arm, and glanced round to see Tilly crouching at his side.

"Who is in there?" whispered the girl.

She looked pale and frightened, and the ooy noticed that she was trembling.

"Don't be frightened," he whispered, cheerfully. "It is some one who knows yer unky, an' they're havin' er leetle chat."

"But they speak so loud and seem so angry."

"Thet's all wind. Reckon yer uncle hain't overly tickled ter see t'other, but there won't be no row."

He did not tell her then that the stranger within the cottage was his old boss. He knew that such information would alarm her, and he had no chance then to explain that Big Bob was not the one who had attempted to take Dave Day's life, as he had learned while crouching beneath the open window.

The boy was becoming greatly interested in the revelations which were coming to him with such rapidity. He had discovered that both Dave Day and Big Bob had once been members of a band of some disreputable character, commanded by an unknown, whom they designated as "ther cap'n." Dave had proved to be a traitor, and the band had finally been broken up. The captain had come East. This same chief of the lawless band had hired one of his former followers, Big Bob, to put Tom Tack to death when the boy was scarcely more than a baby. The big ruffian had preserved the lad's life, knowing that by doing so he would have a hold upon his former captain. At the same time, he had falsely sworn that the boy had been "put out of the way," according to orders.

Some time later, Big Bob had been fortunate enough to get his hands upon a certain paper, which the captain had foolishly preserved. This paper was of more value to the tramp than the boy, and, evidently alarmed by the loss of such a damaging document, the chief villain of the game had disappeared. For years Big Bob had sought him in vain.

Tom was puzzled to know why Dave Day had considered him so valuable, for apparently the cripple had known nothing of the captain's game until Big Bob told him. Tom finally decided that old Dave knew much more than he pretended to.

"Ye c'u'dn't guv er feller er stuck ov grub c'u'd ye?" asked Bob.

"Yes, if you'll 'gree ter git an' not cum back."

"Won't make no 'greements."

"Wal, ye'd better git. Yer apt ter fall inter trubble ef ye hang roun' heer."

Big Bob laughed, sneeringly.

"You don't say? Who'll make me trubble?"

"Wal, p'raps ye've heerd o' Double Jack?"

"Bah! You're used up, ole man. Ye don't think I'm 'feerd ov er cripple do ye? W'y, I

c'u'd wipe ye out in no time ef I tuck er noshun."

"Ef ye think ye kin, just try et."

"W'at's ter hinder?"

"This!"

Tom heard Big Bob utter an oath of surprise, and knew that Dave Day had suddenly produced his big revolver from among the bed-clothes.

"Wal, I swear! So ye'r' armed?"

"Do ye think I'm er fool?" demanded Dave.

"Whar's thet grub; reckon I'll git."

Dave laughed triumphantly, and directed Bob where to find the food.

"Fill yer pockets," ordered Dave. "Take ernuff ter last ye awhile, an' then skip."

"Thankee," mumbled Big Bob. "Don't keer ef I do."

When he had filled all his pockets, the big tramp said:

"Wal, day-day, ole man."

"Good riddence," growled Dave. "Don't ye never poke yer head inside ov my camp erg'in."

Tom seized Tilly by the hand and drew her quickly away from the window. The boy had remained until the last minute, hoping to hear something more of importance.

They reached the cover of the bushes just in time. A moment later, Big Bob came out of the cottage and walked swiftly away.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PRECIOUS PAIR OF VILLAINS.

WHEN Big Bob had disappeared, Tom said:

"I'm goin' ter foller thet chap, Tilly."

The girl instantly looked alarmed.

"What for, Tom? Don't do it! He looks like a bad man, and he may hurt you."

"Don't you worry 'bout thet, Tilly. He'll never see me. I'll cum back all right, don't fear."

With these words, he hurried away in pursuit of Big Bob.

The boy soon came in view of his former master, who was walking leisurely along, going down the valley. The trees were not very thick, but an amount of firs and small cedars made it possible for the boy to follow Big Bob without being detected. The man did not dream of pursuit, and this fact favored the lad.

"I'd kinder like ter know where yer hang-out is," muttered Tom. "You an' Jim must'a camped roun' here summares last night."

Tom did not follow the man too closely, for he did not wish Big Bob to glance around and see him. At times he would quite lose sight of the big tramp, but he found little difficulty in coming near enough to obtain a view when he wanted to.

In this manner Big Bob and his trailer passed the spot where Jim Snap took his involuntary bath. Tom smiled as he thought of the little tramp's terror on finding himself in the water, and his rage when he discovered that it was not very deep.

As they went down the stream the cedar became thicker and Tom was forced to keep nearer the man he was following in order not to lose him in the many natural paths which ran through the bushes.

Big Bob walked slowly with his head bowed, as if thinking. Tom had just come in view of the big tramp who was passing down a sort of natural lane, skirted by thick bushes on either side, when he noticed a man standing at the lower end of the opening, watching Big Bob as he approached.

"Great Jinks!" burst from the boy's lips.

He had recognized the man as Silas Goodwin.

The big tramp had not yet noticed the man, who seemed to be awaiting his approach. There was a strange look on Goodwin's face, and the boy noticed an air of hesitancy and doubt about the man's aspect. He seemed almost on the verge of turning to plunge into the bushes, only refraining from doing so because rooted to the spot by curiosity.

"Looks like he thort he knew Bob, but was sent just sart'in," muttered Tom.

Suddenly, when less than half-a-dozen rods away, Big Bob looked up and saw Goodwin.

A startled oath burst from the tramp's lips.

Goodwin seemed no less moved. He uttered an exclamation of both surprise and dismay.

"Cap'n Flash, by Moses!" cried Bob, triumphantly.

Silas Goodwin's hand moved toward his hip-pocket. There was a murderous gleam in his eyes that Big Bob did not fail to detect.

"Hold on, cap'n!" cried the tramp, quickly.

"Don't ye pull a pop on me! It won't pay ye ter salivate me just now."

"Twould paid me well had I done so ten

years ago," declared Goodwin, in a hard, icy tone.

"Wal, ye didn't do it then, an' ye'd better not now. I kalkerlate I've got suthin' as ye'd like ter git dukes on."

Goodwin hesitated with his right hand still under the tail of his coat. The big tramp knew that the man had him in his power. The lightning-like quickness of this same quiet, gentlemanly Silas Goodwin had caused him to be called "Captain Flash" years before, when he was the leader of a band of lawless men. Quite well did Bob know that should Goodwin feel so inclined, he could pluck forth a revolver and fire almost before his victim could utter a cry; yet the evil-faced ruffian stood gazing at his former master coolly.

"Yes," repeated the tramp, "I kalkerlate I've got suthin' as ye'd like ter git possession ov."

"Well, what's to hinder me from taking it after I drop you?"

Big Bob smiled cunningly.

"Am I er fool, cap'n?"

"Not a fool, Sam, but a confounded scoundrel," was the reply.

"Thankee," grinned the tramp, as if he had just listened to a compliment. "I may be er scoundrel, cap'n, but I can't hold a candle ter you. You just beat ther deck, you do."

"What does all this talk amount to?" demanded Silas Goodwin, impatiently. "What have you got, and why would I not get it if I let daylight through you where you stand?"

"Ye w'u'dn't git it 'cause I hain't fool ernuff ter kerry it roun' on me pusson," was Bob's reply. "I've got er pard w'at I trusts with sech vallyble articles. Ye see how ther lan' lays."

"Well, what have you got?"

"Guess you never missed no paper did ye, boss—no paper as didn't just belong ter ye?"

"Yes, I did," was the prompt reply. "Did you get it?"

"Wal, I sh'u'd smile!"

"Then I am ready to negotiate with you," said Goodwin, quietly, taking his hand away from his pocket. "Come forward, Sam, and we will sit down on this log here."

Big Bob promptly advanced.

"By gingerbread!" exclaimed the watching boy. "If I'm goin' ter hear them fellers chin, I've got ter git nearer. This thing is gittin' mighty interestin'."

Without much difficulty, the lad succeeded in stealing along under cover of the bushes till he reached a spot where he could hear every word uttered by the two men. Both Goodwin and Big Bob had sat down on the log. The former was saying:

"And so you acknowledge stealing that paper do you? I must say that you are well supplied with cheek and pluck to confess that to me. I am in the habit of punishing my assistants who prove false to their trusts. Why should I hold my hand with you?"

Big Bob's face wore a dogged look.

"I guess ye'll consult yer own feelin's 'bout thet," said the tramp. "If ye think it'll pay ye ter straddle my neck, go ahead."

There was a decidedly dangerous look in the rich man's eyes, as he coldly observed:

"Which means that you defy me."

Bob remained obstinate.

"Hav' it ter suit yerself," he grunted.

"My eyes!" thought the watcher. "I'd hate ter hav' Silas Goodwin look at me like that. Big Bob better be er little keerful."

"How much will you take for that paper?" demanded Goodwin, bluntly.

Big Bob began to look uneasy.

"What ef I won't sell?" he asked.

"But you will," declared the other in an icy tone.

"Now, looker here, cap'n," and Bob faced the cool man, "I've bin er-huntin' ov you fer ther last seven y'ars. All this time I've bin makin' nary red—just livin' like er common tramp. Y'ars ergo I dun a big job fer ye—"

"And were paid several times over."

"Yes, ye paid; but I don't reckon I ever got too much fer puttin' ther baby outer ther world."

"You got many times your price—what more do you ask?"

"But that hain't it," faltered the big ruffian.

"You see, yer skipped me, an'—"

"You lost your chance to bleed me," said Silas Goodwin, briefly.

Big Bob seemed a bit confused, but quickly rallied.

"Thet warn't w'at I waz goin' ter say, but let it drap. I've foun' ye at last, an' now I'm ready ter trade, but you've got ter cum down with ther stuff in style."

"Ah!"

That cool, sarcastic expression did more to disconcert the big tramp than anything the man had previously uttered. A look of genuine alarm crept across Bob's face. He knew of old the man sitting by his side. Captain Flash had been a man of fire and ice—a man who could blaze with fury, or freeze the blood in the veins of a foe by the gleam of his eye. He had been a man who valued a human life as lightly as that of a dog. His lawless followers had been afraid of him, although many of them had been vastly superior in brute strength. Bob knew that the quiet, gentlemanly Silas Goodwin was but the wolf in sheep's clothing. The reckless, almost fiendish spirit was there, although held in check.

"I hain't goin' ter be too hard," faltered the tramp.

Goodwin smiled.

"Oh, don't mind that," he said, carelessly. "I can stand it; I have plenty of the needful."

Bob took heart.

"Thet's jest it," he hastened to say. "Ye've got ther skids an' I holped ye git 'em. 'Sides that, I'm one ov yer ole ban' an' am in desprit need ov su'shin' ter keep me outer ther pore-house in mer ole age."

"But this is not a case of charity, Sam; it's business," observed Goodwin, briskly.

"Jest so, cap'n, but I guess you kin 'ford ter be gen'r'us."

"I've heard considerable of that kind of talk. There is one of the old band who has been living on me for several years."

"An' that's Double Jack, ther traitor," said Bob, quickly. "I've just seen him, an' ther lyin' dog same as tole me ye wassen't roun' these parts. But I shu'd thort ye'd settled ther critter's hash long ergo."

"I had a use for him."

Big Bob understood the man. Had not he thought it for his benefit that Dave Day should live, the cripple traitor would have met his death long ere that. The tramp could not refrain from asking himself:

"W'en he gits ther paper, won't he think I'm best off outer ther way?"

And then he thought:

"I will be ready for him. I'm not very slow with er pop."

"You have not set your price, Sam," said Goodwin, very quietly.

"W'at kin ye 'ford ter give, cap'n?"

"I am not making offers for stolen property."

"Reckon w'at property you've got's 'bout ther same as stolen."

Goodwin cast a glance at Bob which made that worthy quail.

"That's right," said Silas, icily. "Express your mind, Sam; don't be a bit bashful."

"I didn't mean nothin'," Bob hastened to declare. "I waz just jokin'."

"This is an excellent time to joke."

Bob felt the sarcasm of these quiet words.

"But to get back to business, Sam, I requested you to set a price on that paper."

But the big tramp did not dare to do so. At first he had been bold enough, but gradually Goodwin's manner had unnerved him. He felt that beneath the quiet exterior of this bland man at his side a hidden devil was lurking. And now, had Silas Goodwin's hand moved toward his hip, Bob would have begged piteously for his life. It was strange what a change had come over him, and he felt sure that his old chief knew that he was once more afraid of him.

"I will tell ye w'at I'll do," said Bob, slowly. "I'll git the paper an' meet ye summares. You kin cum with plenty ov cash. We'll make ther bargain then."

To himself, Bob declared:

"An' I'll hav' Jim Snap with me."

"That suits me," admitted Goodwin promptly. "You come to the house to-night about an hour after dark. I will be on the watch for you, and will admit you if you come alone. I will agree to treat you square, and will listen to your terms. If your price of the paper is not unreasonable, I will pay it, after which you must leave these parts, and if I ever see you again, I promise to shoot you on sight. What do you say to this arrangement?"

Bob shook his head.

"I don't jest like it."

"Why not?" was the stern demand. "Do you insinuate that it is not fair?"

"No, no," the tramp hastened to say. "But I don't just like ter go ter your ranch."

"You think I will play you foul? Well, I have given you my word that I will not. What more do you ask?"

"Nothin', nothin'!"

"Then you will come?"

"P'r'aps."

"There is no perhaps about it. You must promise to come, and if you do not keep your word, you know what the result will be. Do you promise?"

"Yes."

"Good! That settles it. Remember, this evening. Now I will be moving."

Without another word, Silas Goodwin turned and walked away, never once pausing to cast a look over his shoulder. Had he done so, he would have seen Big Bob glaring after him savagely, a look of deepest hatred in his eyes.

After uttering a low, savage oath and shaking his fist toward the spot where Goodwin had disappeared among the bushes, the big tramp wheeled and walked away.

A few seconds later Tom Tack arose from his place of concealment.

"My eyes!" gasped the boy. "I've heard ernuff ter give me er reg'lar old-fashioned headache. But hain't I caught onter a few p'ints—what? Wal, I shu'd snicker! Guess I'll be 'roun' w'en Bobbie goes fer ter deliver up the paper ter-nite. P'r'aps I kin git my spoon inter ther soup. But just now I'm goin' ter foller Bobbie an' see where he goes. P'r'aps I'll git er chance ter snatch the paper."

Then he started cautiously in pursuit of his former master.

CHAPTER IX.

SILAS GOODWIN VISITS UNCLE DAVE.

Tom followed Big Bob until that worthy joined the little tramp, Jim Snap, who was sunning himself in a little glade. The boy did not attempt to approach very near, but suddenly decided to turn back.

"Guess 'tain't no use ter hang roun' them fellers," he thought. "I'd better go back an' let Tilly know I'm all right. 'F I hain't mistook, Silas Goodwin waz makin' fer Dave Day's camp, an' there's apt ter be er ruction ov sum kind. 'Tain't best that ole bloke lays his han' on that girl."

The thought that Tilly might be in danger alarmed him, and he made the greatest haste to return, even running a part of the way. He felt that he would protect the girl with his life.

Ere Tom reached the cottage he was met by Tilly, who appeared frightened.

"Oh, Tom!" she exclaimed, "Mr. Goodwin is in the house, and he and Uncle Dave are fearfully angry with each other. Uncle is swearing terribly."

"Here's another go!" cried the lad. "This is a large day fer picnics."

"But I am afraid there will be trouble, Tom. I never heard uncle talk to Mr. Goodwin in that way before. He has always treated him with the greatest respect."

"Cum' on, Tilly," said the boy, quietly. "I must git under that winder ergin. I'm apt ter hear suthin' ov consider'ble interest."

A short time later they were both crouching under the window, where they could plainly hear everything that was said within the cottage. Goodwin was speaking.

"You brought it on yourself," the man was saying, in a calm, even tone. "You thought you had a foul hold on me, and so you pressed your claim. I am not a man to be crowded, Jack; you ought to know that."

"I didn't crowd ye," retorted Dave, evidently trying to hold his wrath in check. "I just axed ye fer a little more o' ther needful, an' ye c'u'd a' let me had it without never knowin' it waz gone. Ye'r' just rollin' in dead loads o' wealth."

"That is nothing to you. You should not think that because I am wealthy you can bleed me. I am not the man to submit to such a thing."

"Reckon ye'll submit w'en yer forced ter," growled Dave, a dogged inflection in his voice. "I've got er holt on ye wa't ye can't deny."

"Your hold amounts to nothing."

"It don't, hey? Wal, then, w'at fer hav' ye bin payin' me ter keep quiet all these y'ars?"

"Well, Jack, you were one of the old band, and I had some sympathy for you, as you were a cripple."

"Tell that ter ther marines!" was Dave's contemptuous exclamation. "I don't take no stock in such stuff. Ye waz 'feard o' ther gal."

Goodwin laughed quietly.

"You never made a greater mistake in your life. The girl absolutely amounts to nothing. There is no way of proving her identity, and therefore your hold is all in your mind."

"By gingerbread!" whispered Tom. "It looks like you waz connected with this business sum way, Tilly. I'm gittin' more an' more tangled up."

"You hain't seemed ter think this way afore,"

they heard Dave say, "an' I don't believe ye thinks so now. I tell ye, cap'n, ye can't bluff me. Ther gal's vallyble, an' I kin prove that she's w'at I claim; don't ye think I can't?"

"Jack," said the icy voice of Silas Goodwin, "you know better than to crowd me. It isn't healthy."

"I'm not skeered ov ye. You tried ter cook my hash yesterday, but ye see I'm still kickin'. Ye'r' losin' yer art o' handlin' ther sticker, Cap."

Dave Day's voice was tantalizing and insulting in its sneering contempt. But Goodwin replied calmly:

"You are mistaken, old man. I should never have jumped you if you had not provoked me to. As it was, I should have finished you had I not heard some one approaching. I lit out through that very window just in time to avoid being seen by some one who came in the door. I was afraid then that I had not done my duty by you."

"Wal, luck waz on my side then. Reckon it must 'a' been Sam Simpson who skeered ye. He waz here, an' got frightened out hisself."

"Well, Jack, what if I have come back to finish the job now?"

"Ye'll find me ready ter ye."

Goodwin laughed.

"Well, I am not going to finish the job if you are reasonable. I am willing to pay you as much as I have been doing right along—no more."

"But ye've got ter shell out more," declared Dave, determinedly.

There was a moment of silence, then the listeners heard Goodwin say coldly:

"I have warned you, Jack, not to crowd me, and I repeat the warning. If you do so, you will be simply knocking at death's door."

"You can't skeer me that way, cap'n. I've got a grip on ye w'at ye don't dream on."

"W'at do you mean?"

"Just w'at I sez. It won't pay ye ter pick a row with me now."

"You can't work that on me. I know what your grip is, and although I admit to you that I do not doubt that the girl is just what you claim she is, I defy you to prove it."

"The gal hain't all I've got. I kin put my han' on suthin' else as is more dangerous than her."

"What do you mean?"

"Cap'n, I mean business."

Again there was an interval of silence, and Tom fancied that the two men were glaring at each other fiercely.

"He's goin' ter give me away," whispered the lad. "He's goin' ter tell Goodwin that I'm here. Guess there won't be no peace fer me roun' these parts arter this. That infernal Goodwin's er bad man ter hev' lookin' arter a feller."

Tilly made no reply, but pressed closer to Tom's side. She could not understand what the strange events which were occurring so rapidly meant.

Soon Goodwin spoke, still cool and unexcited:

"Jack, let me understand you. Your words are not as clear as they might be."

"Cap'n, you hav' called me er traitor, but did ye never dream that there waz one o' ther ole band as had used ye wuss nor I ever did?"

"Who?"

"Can't ye guess? I waz forced ter squawk w'en er blamed officer had me foul; but one o' ther gang played roots onter ye fer just no reason at all 'cept that he wanted ter git er grip on ye."

"Who?"

Again Goodwin repeated the question.

"Wal, ther fu'st initials o' his name is Sam Simpson. Guess ye know him."

Goodwin leaped to his feet.

"Are you the one with whom he intrusted that paper?" he demanded, hoarsely. "Have you it in your possession? By heavens! if you have—"

"What do yer mean?" asked the wounded man, surprised by his visitor's sudden emotion.

"What are ye torkin' 'bout?"

"That paper which the treacherous whelp stole from me. Have you got it?"

"No, I hain't got it, but I saw it less than an hour ergo."

"You did? Where?"

"Here in this shanty. Simpson waz here, an' took ther paper frum his pocket. I tried ter git him ter let me see et, but he w'u'dn't do so."

"Curse him!" gritted the deluded man. "I met him when he came from here, and he swore that he did not have the paper with him!"

"Then he lied, cap'n."

For a few moments Silas Goodwin was furious, then he cooled down as swiftly as he had become enraged.

"Is it that paper to which you referred?" he asked.

"No, it is sumthin' else."

"What?"

"Wal, ye hired Simpson ter put ther kid outen ther wav w'en he waz er baby."

"You say so."

"An' I know it. You paid him putty well for doin' ther job, an' he swore ther kid was dead. But he lied like sin!"

"What!"

For a moment Goodwin was startled. Dave Day laughed exultantly.

"So thet starts ye, duz it?" he grinned. "Wal, I kinder thort it w'u'd!"

In a moment Goodwin was his old cool self. He sunk back into the chair in an indifferent manner, looking more amused than concerned.

"Yes, you did give me a start," he admitted.

"But, your game is too thin. It won't hold water."

"Won't, hey? Wal, I know it will. I'm tellin' ye ther Gospel truth w'en I say that Sam Simpson never killed ther kid. The boy's erlive ter-day, an' I know just where ter lay my han' on 'im."

Goodwin laughed outright.

"I will believe that when I see the boy."

"Which you shell. I tell ye I kin put my han' outen him, an' I hain't foolin'. Guess you'll cum down with ther skids if I kin bring out ther boy."

"This is all foolishness, Jack; you know you can't do so."

Dave uttered an oath.

"I tell ye I kin," he persisted. "With ther boy an' gal both, I'm pritty well fixed ter hold up my end with ye. You've got ter pay me ter keep still, fer I c'u'd ruin ye ef I wanted ter."

"I have paid you well already. What have you done with the money I have given you every three months? You have lived like a dog, and must have enough stored away to last you till you die."

"Oh, no, no! I hain't got er cent," Dave hastened to say. "Not a cent. I've used it all."

"You're an old liar!"

Goodwin uttered the words quietly enough, and Dave did not resent them.

"I don't keer," mumbled the old man. "I know where ther kid is, an' you've got ter shell out."

"It is no use to talk with you any longer," said Goodwin, rising.

"Yer may go ef ye want ter, but I'll show ye that I hain't lyin'," declared Dave, desperately.

Tom did not wait to hear any more, for he had no desire to be seen by Silas Goodwin. Swiftly and silently, he and Tilly crept away and concealed themselves amid some bushes. A minute later the door opened and Silas Goodwin came out.

When the man had disappeared, Tom turned to his companion and said:

"Tilly, there's been er heap ov crooked work dun, what Silas Goodwin is responsible fer."

"I fear he is a bad man," she confessed.

"Bad! He's er sardine! I can't just git it through my cabeza w'at he's dun, but he's cut sum deviltry. He's my w'u'st foe, Tilly, an' yourn. We're both mixed up in ther scrape sumhow."

Then he told her what he had seen and overheard at the meeting of Goodwin and Big Bob.

"Sumhow that old bloke, Goodwin, wanted me put outen ther way. Big Bob tolle him that w'at shekels he had got waz ther same as stole, an' yer Uncle Dave repeated putty near the same. Now, puttin' this an' that tergether, I've got an ijee. I may be right or I may be 'way off mer underpinnin'. That remains ter be seen."

"But what can we do, Tom? I am afraid of Uncle Dave now. He seems as bad as the rest."

"Guess there hain't much ch'ice. That ole sinner hain't yer natteral-born uncle anyhow! You're inter this business as big as I be, an' I will hang by ye through thick an' thin. There's goin' ter be er rustlin' 'mong ther dry bones afore shortly, an' I'm goin' ter create ther rustle."

"But where can we stay now?"

"Right here in this camp. 'Twon't do ter let 'em suspec' that we know er thing. You mus' act just ther same as usual, so't ole Dave won't ketch on. I hain't jest got my plans made yit,

but ef I only c'u'd git my forks onter that paper, I'd strike fur ther biggest lawyer I c'u'd find an' we'd go fer this gang ov crooks."

"But I'm afraid I cannot act natural."

"No trubble 'bout that. Jest brace right up. We'll go in now."

After some hesitancy, Tilly finally consented and they went in together. They found Dave Day lying with his face to the wall, evidently enjoying a good nap, but Tom knew well enough that the wounded man was shamming.

CHAPTER X.

TOM SECURES THE PAPER.

TOM TACK realized that he was beset by perils. Foes seemed multiplying on every hand, any one of whom was apparently more than a match for the boy. He had hoped to frighten Big Bob away from that part of the country, by making the big tramp believe that he had been seen when he attempted to take the life of old Dave Day, but now he knew that Bob was not the one who had stricken the cripple down. Silas Goodwin had perpetrated that deed.

Had Tom not been obliged to expose himself to view when he rescued Tilly from Jim Snap's obnoxious grasp, the boy might have kept his presence in that vicinity a secret from the tramps, who both believed him dead. But that encounter had made such a thing impossible, as the pickpocket tramp had seen and recognized the lad.

Tom knew that Dave Day was a selfish, unscrupulous old scoundrel, who cared nothing for any one but himself, and was ready to do any mean thing to obtain money. Old Dave's friendship was a thing to be smiled at in contempt. It was simply impossible for the old man to be a true friend to any one.

But Silas Goodwin was a foe to be feared more than all the others, for he was the chief rascal of the lot. He it was who had planned the entire desperate game, the others had simply been his tools. Tom felt sure that should Goodwin learn that he was truly alive, his life would be in great danger indeed, for the man would hesitate at nothing to remove from his path the boy whom he had once hired a desperate man to slay.

Knowing all this, the Boy Tramp was not daunted, although he doubted his ability to cope with the dangers which surrounded him. Could he but get possession of that precious paper, Tom felt that he would soon be beyond the reach of his foes. From a distance, he would be able to deal blows which would soon put the villains to rout and give him back what was rightfully his own. Tom had little doubt now but that he was rightfully the heir to an amount of property. But, Tilly, too, was connected with the case in some way, although the boy was puzzled to understand just how it all was.

The day passed, and with the shadows of night the lad left the cottage, after cautioning the girl about letting Dave Day know where he had gone. Tom did not wish the old man to think that he had the least knowledge of the actual state of affairs. He managed to slip away when the cripple was not on the watch.

Straight toward Silas Goodwin's house on the hill he made his way. He had not waited until it was very dark, for fear that he would not reach Goodwin's ere Big Bob put in an appearance. He did not doubt but Bob would come, for he believed that the tramp would not dare to break his word with his former chief.

A dusky gloom, through which occasionally screamed a wandering night bird, shrouded the hills and valleys. Swiftly Tom passed out of the strip of timber which followed the course of the stream and made toward the point where a light gleamed out far away on the hillside.

"This is doin' detective work in earnest," said the boy, aloud. "I allus thort I'd like ter be a detective, but I never dreamed I'd begin on my own case. If I make a failure ov this, I'll never tackle ernuther. As fer that, if I fail an' Silas Goodwin gits his paws onter me, I don't kalkerlate I'll hav' er chance ter tackle ernuther. I feel just like I needed sum help bad."

A brisk walk soon brought him in the vicinity of Goodwin's residence on the hillside. He skulked along the fences till he came to a thick cedar hedge which skirted the grounds. He soon found a way to pass beyond this, but remained lying close to the cedars within the grounds.

"Guess he don't keep a dawg," muttered the boy. "Ef there is any one kind of an animal critter as I don't like it's a dawg."

A light shone from the upper windows in the front part of the old house. The windows were directly above a balcony, and for some reason

the Boy Tramp decided that the light was within Silas Goodwin's private room where he intended to meet Big Bob.

He was right.

The boy had not been on the watch a long time when he saw a man enter the grounds and pass up the gravel walk. The lad knew the man's step, and rightly concluded that it was Big Bob. The tramp rung at the door, which was soon opened, and he passed into the house.

Like a shadow the boy glided across the grounds, taking care not to step upon the gravel-strewn walk. Scarcely a noise did he make till he had gained a position where he could gaze up at the windows above the balcony.

The night was quite warm, and one of the windows to Goodwin's room had been lifted from the bottom. The crimson curtains had not been fully drawn, as the inmate desired to receive the benefit of every breath of air.

As the boy stood gazing up at the window, he heard a voice which he recognized as Goodwin's, although he could not distinguish the words. Then he felt sure that he heard Big Bob reply.

"By gingerbread! I wish I waz up there. Ef I waz, I c'u'd hear ther whole business. I must find er way ter git up."

With this determination, he began to inspect the surroundings. He soon discovered that a stout limb from a tree that grew near the corner of the house overhung the balcony. If he could get into the branches of the tree, it would not be a difficult thing to reach the balcony. A moment later he discovered a swing rope that hung from a stout limb of that very tree.

"Hi, Jinks!" he exclaimed, softly. "Here's ther biggest piece ov luck! I kin climb that rope like a cat'd shin up ther side ov a barn. Guess I'll overhear that interview."

He spit on his hands, and grasping the rope, went up, hand over hand, reaching the limb with little difficulty. He then swung himself up into the tree.

"Now ter git under that winder," he breathed. "So far I'm havin' large luck."

He crept out on the branch that overhung the balcony, and noiselessly let himself down within ten feet of the open window. Pausing there, with bated breath, he heard Goodwin and Big Bob conversing within the room. Too late, he wished he had removed his shoes ere ascending the rope. But this could not be done now, so he noiselessly sunk upon his knees and crept forward inch by inch.

"I'm boun' ter git that sumhow," he thought.

A few seconds later he was beneath the open window, where he could plainly hear every word spoken by the two men within the room. Big Bob was talking, and Tom heard him declare in an indignant tone of voice:

"I tell ye it's er blamed lie, cap'n. I fixed ther kid jest ez I 'greed ter. Ef Double Jack tells ye ther kid is erlive, w'y he lies—that's all."

Tom judged that Bob was sitting near the window, and when Goodwin spoke, the boy knew that he was further away.

"But he persisted that the boy was alive, and he knew just where to put his hand on him."

"That waz all bluff. Ther ole fool wanted ter make ye shell out more skids."

"He even declared that he would show me the boy."

"Er trick, cap'n; er trick. He has probly got sum other younker w'at he's goin' ter try ter palm off on ye ez ther genooin."

"Double Jack ought to know better than to try that on me."

"Wal, it's pritty plain that he don't."

"You say that you put the boy out of the way yourself. You hired no one else to do it?"

"Not much. I 'tended ter it."

"Then that settles it. Now, about that paper."

"It's here."

"All right. How much do you want for it?"

"Wal, I dunno."

"Let's see it. I am not sure you have it till I see it."

"Hold on, cap'n. Ef ye git yer forks onter that paper, how am I ter know I'll ever git er cent fer it?"

"You need not let me take it in my hands. Simply hold it up so I can see it."

"Here she am."

Tom ventured to lift up his head and peer into the room. He saw Big Bob holding the precious paper for Goodwin's inspection, and a dozen wild schemes for securing the precious document passed swiftly through his mind. Once he was on the verge of springing into the room and snatching the paper from Bob's hand. If he was swift enough, he might surprise the villains so that he would be able to escape ere

they intercepted him. But a moment later he saw the folly of making such an attempt.

"The paper is all right," admitted Silas Goodwin. "Now how much do you want for it?"

"W'u'd five thousan' be too much?"

"Is that your price?"

"Wal, I guess so."

"I will pay it. That was exactly the limit I had decided on. Had you asked for one cent more, you would not have got it. Since meeting you, I have been to Eddington and drawn that sum from the bank. I have it here."

Goodwin produced a fat-looking pocketbook.

"Now, I want you to understand me before you take this money," he said, impressively. "I am going to pay the sum on condition that you get out of these parts and never show your face here again. If you ever do, I swear to shoot you on sight. Do you understand?"

"Ye tork plain ernuff."

"Well, do you agree?"

"Yes."

"Then the bargain is made. Let's have your paper; here's the money."

An instant later Bob leaped to his feet, fairly shouting:

"Great Moses! It's gone!"

"What's that?" demanded Goodwin, instantly. "What is gone?"

"Ther paper! I laid it here on the window-stool fer er jiff, an' now it's gone."

A dark, deadly look came over Silas Goodwin's face.

"Don't attempt to play any trick on me, Sam Simpson."

"It hain't no trick," protested the amazed and frightened tramp. "I'm givin' it to ye straight."

"Hasn't the paper fallen upon the floor?"

"No."

"Then it must have fallen out of the window. Just step out upon the balcony. I will hold the light for you to look around."

Not daring to turn his back upon his former chief, Big Bob got out of the window backward. Goodwin did not appear to notice this act of precaution, but lifting the light, he held it for Bob to look around.

"Tain't here," the tramp declared.

Goodwin set down the lamp and sprung out through the window.

"There's something almighty strange about this," he said.

"That's so, cap'n," Bob acknowledged. "Ha! Look there!"

He seized Goodwin's arm and pointed toward a dark figure that was running across the grounds toward an opening in the hedge.

"Tricked!" hissed the chief villain, as he plucked forth a revolver from his pocket.

A second later the darkness was punctured by a round bar of flame and a sharp report rung out.

The fleeing form did not pause, but as it disappeared beyond the hedge, a triumphant boyish laugh came floating back on the breeze.

CHAPTER XI.

A NEW CHARACTER APPEARS.

TOM TACK had secured the paper and escaped in safety with it in his possession.

When Big Bob had laid the precious document on the window-stool, still fearing an attack from Silas Goodwin and wishing to have his hands free to defend himself the instant it was made, the boy on the balcony had lost no time in seizing the paper. Tom knew that it would be only a brief space of time ere the valuable paper would be missed by the two scoundrels, and he made haste to get down from the balcony.

"I've got ter hustle fer all I'm w'uth," he thought.

He lost no time in reaching the branch which overhung the balcony. The paper he had thrust into his pocket, and seizing the limb he soon made his way to the tree. At this point he heard Big Bob's hoarse shout of amazement when he missed the paper.

"Jimmy crickets!" laughed the venturesome lad. "But won't there be a jubilee now!"

Swiftly he made his way to the swing rope and slid down to the ground. He was glad then that he had not removed his shoes, for he would have been bothered either to put them on or carry them in his hands. Stepping back a short distance, he looked up to see Big Bob backing out through the window.

A desire to witness the discomfiture and dismay of the rascals caused Tom to pause a moment ere making off with his prize. He saw the smooth, evil face of the greater scoundrel as he

held the lamp for Bob to look around, and heard the big tramp declare:

"Tain't here."

Then Tom decided that he had better be moving. Swiftly and as silently as possible he ran toward an opening in the hedge. He felt sure that he would be seen ere he got across the grounds, but was confident that he could elude pursuers.

The bullet from Silas Goodwin's revolver sped so close to Tom's head that he felt the wind from it, and he distinctly heard it whistle through the air when it had passed. Then he sent back that mocking laugh.

"By gingerbread!" he muttered, as he dashed through the opening in the hedge. "Thet Cap'n Flash meant well ernuff, an' thet bullet kem mighty nigh cookin' my goose. Reckon he'd 'a' brought me ef he'd had ernuther chance. But I've got ther paper, an' he's got ter ketch me ef he wants it."

But the boy was destined to meet an unexpected adventure. As he ran through the gloom, a dark form arose before him and he felt himself seized in a strong pair of arms, while a hearty voice said:

"Hold on, my lad. Take a reef in your legs, and tell us what your hurry is."

In a moment Tom realized that he could not break away from this unknown man, but he cried:

"Let me go! Let me go, I tell you! W'at yer freezin' onter a feller like this fer?"

"I want to know what the row is," was the reply. "You seem to be in a mighty rush. Who fired that shot, and what did he fire it at? The lead sung mighty close to my ears."

A sudden thought struck Tom.

"Are you er frien' ov Silas Goodwin's?" he demanded.

"Why?"

"'Cause ef ye hain't, ye'd better be gittin'. Goodwin will be here in less'n three shakes, an' he'll bring his pop with him."

"What have you been doing—nicking?"

"No, I hain't!" was the indignant reply. "I hain't no thief. But there hain't no time ter gab ef we're goin' ter slide afore Goodwin shows up."

"Say, boy," spoke the man, earnestly, "I want to quiz you. Perhaps you can give me some points."

"This hain't no place fer blab."

"I think you're right. We'll get away from here. Lead on; I'll follow."

Something seemed to tell Tom that this man was not a friend of Silas Goodwin, and without hesitation, the boy ran swiftly across the road and vaulted the fence. A glance over his shoulder showed him that the man was at his heels.

Down the hillside bounded the boy, the stranger following him closely. Not a word did either of them utter, knowing that the sound of their voices might aid pursuers. Tom was wondering who the unknown could be, and the man was more than half inclined to believe that the lad was really a thief who had been detected by the master of the house.

They soon reached the woods in the valley, and the boy slackened his pace, feeling a curiosity to know who and what the stranger was. He was breathing heavily, but Tom decided that he must be a good runner not to be quite winded by the brisk pace. Neither spoke for a time.

Finally, when they had reached a little glade in the center of a thick mass of bushes, the lad turned and faced his unbidden companion, saying curtly:

"Wal?"

"Let me fairly get my wind before we begin to talk," entreated the man, laughing a little.

"You are quite a kid on the foot."

"I kin skin erlong w'en I hav' ter," Tom admitted.

"What was the row back there?" demanded the stranger.

"Guess they spotted me spyin'," was the frank response.

"What were you spying for?"

"Now, hold on, mister. I don't know as I'm under any obligashuns ter tell you my business."

"You can do as you please about that, but if you do not talk straight I shall feel it my duty to arrest you on suspicion that you are a sneak thief."

"Whew!" whistled the boy. "So ye'r a n'ofisser? Wal, I'll be skinned!"

"Are you going to tell me what you were up to?" was the stern demand.

"Now hold on, boss; don't try to push me. P'raps you an' I kin hitch hosses."

The stranger seemed interested.

"What do you mean?"

"Wal, ye see, boss, I'm er detective myself."

"You?"

"Bet yer socks! Hain't I er dandy? Reckon ye can't see very well, but I'm togged out in disguise—tatters an' rags frum head ter fut. I waz doin' er little work up there w'en Goodwin spotted me."

The man could scarcely restrain an outburst of laughter. He decided that the lad had been perusing detective stories until he had decided that he would become a detective himself.

"So you are a detective, are you?" said the stranger, deciding to humor the strange lad in what he believed was a whim. "What lay are you on?"

"Oh, I'm workin' up mer own case. I kinder thort p'raps I'd better begin ter hum, an' then branch out arter I got ernuff 'sperience."

"I am right," thought the man. "He's one of 'em, and we find them everywhere. I have known more than five hundred just such cases."

Aloud he said:

"What is your name?"

"Tom Tack."

"Do you belong around here?"

"Nixey."

"Where do you belong?"

"Don't berlong nowhere. I'm er natteral born orphing w'at hain't got no home."

"Are you giving it to me straight?"

"Straight's er string."

"Then I suppose that you are a tramp."

"That's mer profeshun," admitted Tom; "but I'm sumtimes er dite slow 'bout 'mittin' it, fer ther law's er little rough on us fellers."

"Perhaps I know more about you than you think. You ran away from your former master, whose name is Bob."

Tom was surprised.

"Thet's ther Gospel truth," he acknowledged; "though how you knew it kinder gits me."

"This Bob thought you was dead until informed that you were alive and kicking. His informant had just seen you and been induced to go in bathing without removing his clothes."

"Say, boss," cried the boy, with increasing amazement, "where'd ye ketch onter all this?"

The man was amused at the boy's surprise, and laughed softly.

"Suppose I should claim that a bird told me?"

"Yer can't work that racket on me. I'm feathered myself."

"I should say you are. Tom, I kind of like your style. You appear like a sharp kid."

"Oh, stow that!" muttered the lad, with an accent of disgust. "No soft soap in mine, ef you please."

The man was slightly puzzled by the lad. He found Tom to be sharper and more sensible than he had supposed at first. Gradually he was changing his mind concerning the boy. Instead of being deluded into the belief that he could become a smart detective, the boy might actually be working in his own way on a case of some interest. The stranger resolved to be frank with the boy as far as he deemed it prudent.

"I will tell you, Tom, how I came to know so much about you. I happened to overhear some talk between two tramps, and from what they said I learned what I have just told you, besides getting some points of interest for myself."

"Them waz Big Bob and Jim Snap," decided at once.

"Yes, their names were Bob and Jim, for I heard them call each other so."

"W'at else did ye hear?" asked the boy, hoping that the man had learned something which might prove of interest to him.

"Well, I heard very little, although it was enough to assist me a bit. I knew that Bob was going to Goodwin's to deliver up a paper of some kind which he had stolen years before."

Tom smiled, but he did not tell this stranger that that very paper was in his pocket at that moment. The lad was too shrewd to put too much trust in the unknown.

"That paper, Tom, I would give much to gain possession of."

"Oh-o! You w'u'd, w'u'd ye?" thought the boy. "Wal, I guess ye won't get it in er hurry."

"If I am not mistaken, it is a very valuable document and one which would be of material benefit to me."

"P'raps it'll benefit me er dite," was Tom's mental remark.

The stranger continued:

"I followed this man Bob, vainly hoping to contrive a plan to get my hands on that paper; but the fellow evidently suspected that he was followed, for he managed to give me the shake."

When I found that he had skipped me, I made for Goodwin's and got along just in time to hear the shot and came near catching the bullet. You followed the lead."

"An' you waz there to stop me. I thort my goose waz cooked w'en I run inter your han's."

The man laughed a little.

"Well, now, Tom, what do you know about Silas Goodwin?" he asked.

"I know that he's er measly ole fraud," was the boy's indignant declaration.

"I guess you're about right on that."

"I know I be."

"Have you ever had any dealings with him in anyway?"

"No, but he's had er few dealin's with me," was the reply, as Tom thought how Goodwin had hired Big Bob to "put him out of the way."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Look here, boss," said Tom, "are you goin' ter hang roun' here long?"

"I may for a time."

"Will ye be here ter-morrer?"

"Yes."

"Wal, then's ther time fer us ter do our chinnin'. I reckon ye'r' a detective. Ef yer are, an' ye'r' a white man, I kin put ye onther biggest case ye ever tackled. Ef yer er cove w'at kin be bought off by er rascal's stolen swag, w'y I don't want northin' ter do with ye."

The man began to realize that the boy was sharper than he had ever imagined, and somehow Tom's words impressed him very much. It seemed that the lad was really engaged on some work of importance.

"I pretend to be an honest man," said the stranger; "and I am sure that you can trust me."

"Then meet me right here ter-morrer mornin' by eight o'clock sharp. I'll be on han', but I can't stop ter blab no more ter-nite. So long."

And with this unceremonious adieu, Tom darted into the bushes and disappeared.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HAND OF AN UNKNOWN.

Tom had resolv'd no to make any further delay till he moved to place that precious paper in a place of safety. He knew that he could not carry it on his person without being in constant danger of losing it some way, and he thought that Tilly might know of a safe place where it could be concealed.

Tom was highly elated over his success in obtaining possession of the paper. He had been more fortunate in that respect than he had thought possible, and he chuckled with glee as he hurried through the wood.

"My eyes! hain't this just a high ole piece ov luck! Wal, I should serclaim! Worked ther hull business just like fallin' off a log. Guess I'd make er pretty good detective arter all. Don't believe I'd hav' sech luck every time. Hi Jinks! but I'll bet ole Goodwin waz mad, an' I shu'dn't wonder ef Big Bob waz too. It must hav' bin quite er disipp'int mint not gittin' his forks onther five thousan'. W'u'dn't Bob 'a' cut a swell with ther boddle! W'y he'd blowed it in in lessin' er month an' bin as bad off as ever."

Thus muttering to himself, he hastened forward.

Suddenly he paused and listened, fancying that he had heard a cautious call a short distance away. Indeed, he was quite sure that he was not mistaken.

Almost a minute passed, then he plainly heard the call repeated:

"Hello, cap'n!"

It was Big Bob's voice.

"Great Jehossifat!" gasped the boy. "They're arter me red-hot. Wile I've bin chinnin' with ther fly them fellers has got roun' atween me an' Dave Day's hang-out. There's blood on ther moon."

Tom felt that he might get into trouble ere he reached the cottage.

He heard Big Bob again utter a cautious hail, then he heard it answered by Goodwin a short distance away. Having obtained a knowledge of the position of the two men, Tom stole cautiously forward. Soon he perceived a dark form in an opening just ahead.

"I've twigged one ov ye," he breathed, with grim satisfaction.

He paused and watched the dark form. Soon it was joined by another that came out of the bushes.

"Seen anything, Bob?"

"Nary thing, cap'n."

Tom heard these words and chuckled noiselessly with delight.

"Yer hain't apt ter see anythin' right erway," he thought.

"I am sure that the infernal thief came down this way," declared Goodwin. "When I reached the hedge, I was pretty positive that I saw two forms racing down the hillside."

"Yer eyes are sharper'n mine, cap'n," Big Bob admitted. "I never caught er glimp' over blamed thing."

"But you were behind me. You did not reach the hedge as soon as I did."

"Thet's so, cap'n."

"Well, we shall never catch the thief by remaining here. That paper *must* be recovered. Should it fall into certain hands, I am ruined."

"Are you goin' ter s'arch furder ter-nite?" asked Bob.

"I don't see that it is of any use. We have no trail to work on, and it is simply hit or miss, therefore we will have to give it up to-night. I shall study out some plan to recover that paper. I must get my hands on it some way."

The two scoundrels talked a few minutes more, then separated, Goodwin immediately disappearing in the bushes. Big Bob walked straight toward the log where Tom was concealed and paused within four feet of the boy. For several moments the tramp stood there in silence, then he muttered:

"Guess I know where to put my han' on that paper. If that infernal kid hain't got it, then I don't know northin'. My ears hain't crooked, an' I know that waz Tom Tack's laff w'at follerred Goodwin's shot."

"Bet yer socks, ole man," thought the listening boy.

"I didn't dare ter let ther cap'n know 'bout ther kid, fer he'd smelt er rat fus' jump. 'Tain't very healthy roun' these parts now fer me, an' it 'd be wuss ef he shu'd fin' out that ther kid hain't croaked. Reckon I'll git mer fingers onther paper erg'in ef northin' happens."

"Bet er bob-tailed muel ye don't," was Tom's mental observation.

Big Bob went on:

"I c'u'dn't hardly berlieve that ther kid hadn't passed out w'en Jim tolle me, but it's er sure 'nuff fac'. I'll git holt on him erg'in ef I want him, but I w'u'dn't dare ter use him on ther cap'n as I 'tended ter. Ther cap'n's just as bad as he ever waz, an' that's ernuff. I don't want ter monkey with him ter no great extent."

"Don't blame ye, Bobby," thought Tom.

"Just now I'm goin' ter fin' Jim an' turn in."

Then the big tramp walked forward, stepped upon the very log behind which the boy was lying, passed over him and plunged into the bushes.

"Good riddance," breathed the lad, as he listened to Bob's retreating footsteps.

When those sounds had died out in the distance, Tom arose, chuckling softly:

"Fun? Wal, I should smile! Just dead loads ov it! So Bobby thinks he'll git ther paper? Wal, he won't. I don't propose ter let that vallyble docky-mint slip erway frum me erg'in. I've got it, an' I'm goin' ter keep it."

Then he hurried toward the cottage.

Old Dave Day was sitting upon the bed when Tom entered, looking decidedly worried. His face brightened at sight of the boy.

"Whar in ther worl' ye bin, Tommy?" he asked. "I was gittin' real anxi'us on yer 'count."

"Ther ole hipp'er crit!" muttered the boy.

"W'at ye say, Tommy?" demanded Dave, quickly.

"I didn't just ketch w'at yer sed."

"I sed I'd bin out fer a walk. I'm quite er chapter take little walks fer mer health."

"I'm er afraid this hain't er very safe country fer walkin', Tommy. It's danger'us ter go prowlin' roun' all er lone, an' ef anythin' shu'd happen ter you now, Tommy, it w'u'd be an awful blow fer me. I'd be mighty lonesum without ye now, fer I'm northin' but a pore ole man with no frien's in ther worl' 'cept mer little niece. I'm er pore ole man, goin' down ter m'r last rest pritty fast. I hain't long fer this worl', Tommy."

Old Dave snuffed and whimpered in a fruitless attempt to start a tear. Tom could scarcely suppress an outburst of laughter.

"Don't ye want me ter run an' git ye an onion, uncle?" he asked, with mock solicitude. "Don't believe ye kin squeeze out er single weep without one, an' er mighty strong one at that."

Dave looked offended for a moment, then he began to laugh in a dry, cackling way.

"Putty good! putty good!" he mumbled. "Ye'r' a sharp kid, Tommy—yes ye be! They can't git ahead o' you, Tommy."

Tom made no reply, but turned to where Tilly was sitting by the open window. The girl's face wore a bright smile of welcome. Tom drew a chair close to where she was and sat down. The girl had been studying an old book, by the light of the lamp which stood on the table at her side.

Paying no further heed to Dave Day, Tom began to chat with Tilly. He did not speak of the evening's adventures then, for he knew that Dave's eyes were on him and Dave's ears were wide open. Tilly offered to teach him the alphabet out of the book, and for a time the boy and girl sat with their heads close together.

Finally old Dave began to breathe heavily, and in a few minutes he was snorin'. Tom glanced around at the old man, and becoming convinced that he was really asleep, took the paper from his pocket.

"Tilly," he said, exultantly, in a low tone, "I've got ther paper!"

"Oh, Tom," she exclaimed. "How did you succeed?"

Briefly he told her of his adventures since leaving her, and then he said:

"Read it, Tilly; I want ter know w'at's in it."

She took the paper and opened it. It was yellow with age and quite dirty. In places it was badly worn.

For a few moments the girl scanned the document closely, and then a sudden light broke over her face.

"Why, it's a will!" she cried, guardedly.

"A what?" demanded the boy.

"A will—a paper making disposition of property."

"Read it! read it!" panted Tom. "See if my name's there anywhere. Read it!"

At that instant a burly hand and arm darted in at the window, and the precious paper was snatched from Tilly's grasp. Then hand, arm and paper swiftly vanished, and the boy and girl heard the sound of speedily retreating footsteps.

CHAPTER XIII.

TOM INVADES THE ENEMY'S CAMP.

The following morning Tom Tack met the stranger at the appointed place. The boy tramp looked very sober and dejected, and his air was that of a person who is thoroughly ashamed of himself.

The stranger had just reached the place of meeting when Tom appeared. The man was apparently about forty years of age; his face was smooth-shaved, thus exposing features which seemed rather cold and stern. There was a certain iron firmness about his lower jaw that suggested a very determined character. His eyes were steel-blue and very piercing. But when he saw the approaching lad he smiled in a manner that plainly revealed a pleasant side to his character.

"Ah, Tom, my lad, you are looking decidedly glum," was his greeting. "What has gone wrong?"

"Boss," said the boy. "did ye ever see er fool?"

"Lots of them."

"Then I can't interjuce meself as er bloomin' cur'osity. Guess I look rather common."

The stranger laughed.

"What's the trouble?"

"Trubble ernuff ter make me feel like er idjit fer ther rest ov mer lifetime."

"You don't look as if you slept a wink last night."

"I didn't. I stayed up an' kicked myself round Dave Day's ranch. Oh, I had er great big time!"

"But you don't seem inclined to tell me what it was all about. Here's a log—let's sit down and have a little talk."

Tom came forward, and they both sat down on the log. The man was studying the boy's face closely, and was becoming convinced that Tom was a shrewd, intelligent lad, whom he could trust.

"Now, my boy," said the man, "if you will tell me of your trouble perhaps I can aid or advise you. In turn, I may want you to help me."

Tom looked the man straight in the face.

"Boss," he began, "ef we're goin' ter be frien's, we've got ter be frank with each other—no half-way business will do. I'm ready ter treat ye as square as ye do me. I'm ready ter answer yer questions ef ye do mine."

"That is fair enough. What do you want to know?"

"Yer name."

"Justin Manly."

"An' are ye a detective?"

"I am."

"Guess ye'r' layin' fer ole Goodwin."

"That is about ther size of it."

"Good! Now I understand ye, boss; an' we're on ther same lay. I'm arter ole Goodwin red-hot, an' I did hav' er foul grip on him, but lost it las' night. That's w'at makes me feel ser' much like er blanked fool."

Then the boy told the detective of his past life, of his suspicions, how he had come to believe that he was some one except Tom Tack, a common tramp, and how he had finally got on track of the truth. The man evinced great interest from the start, and as the boy progressed his interest deepened. He frequently interrupted Tom with exclamations of satisfaction. When the lad told of Goodwin's meeting with Big Bob and what he then overheard, the detective could scarcely restrain his delight.

"Tom," he finally cried, "you are worth big money to me. You have settled a point in my mind of which I was not certain. I have traced the career of this Goodwin and connected him with the Captain Flash who was chief of a band of marauders in California nearly twenty years ago. My proof was not positive, but your testimony will furnish the missing link. But go on."

Then the boy told of Goodwin's visit to Dave Day, and what he and Tilly overheard while crouching beneath the window. Suddenly the detective caught Tom by the shoulder and whirled him so that he could look into the boy's eyes.

"By the Lord Harry!" he exclaimed. "I see the whole thing now. It is plain enough. Boy, if I am not mistaken, Silas Goodwin is living in luxury out of what is rightfully yours. And that girl of which you speak—it may be!"

Tom was a little surprised, but anxious to have the detective make things clear.

"No, Tom; I am not going to tell you anything just now, for I may not be right. If I am, you shall know soon enough. One thing is certain, you must not stop around Dave Day's another night, for you are in danger there. We will beat this Captain Flash on the end of his big game."

Then Tom told how he had obtained possession of the paper and escaped, and how it had been snatched from Tilly's hands just as the girl was going to read it. Tom was very indignant at his own folly in allowing Tilly to sit so close to the open window. He had dashed out in pursuit of the unknown, but had found nothing.

"I knewed that han', though. Twas Big Bob's fin," asserted Tom.

"Your former master?"

"Ther same ole sinner."

Then it is possible that the paper is not yet in Silas Goodwin's hands. We must try to intercept it before it reaches him. Oh, Tom, if you had only told me this last night!"

"Guess I might 'a' bin better off," admitted the lad; "but a feller never knows just ther best thing ter do."

"Quite true, and it is useless to cry over spilled milk. Now that you have told me so much, I will tell you how I came to be after Silas Goodwin. This man, Captain Flash, is a born crook. It is only by the utmost self-restraint that he

the leader of evil men. He has brains to plot crafty and dangerous games for securing that which is not rightfully his own. So much for his character.

"Almost five years ago, the bank at Hilton, a busy little town about a hundred and fifty miles from here, was robbed of twenty-one thousand dollars. The burglars struck the bank at just the right time and made a clean sweep. A large reward was offered for the apprehension of the guilty parties, but they have never been brought to justice. I worked on the case for several months, but was forced to give it up as a bad job.

"Over six months ago, a professional crook was fatally injured while resisting arrest in Philadelphia. I was present, and when he found that he was dying, the man made a confession. He had been leagued with Goodwin in the Hilton bank robbery, but Goodwin had not used him square. He swore to betray the man to the law, but never dared to do so. Finding that he was dying, he sought to be revenged, but died ere he could complete his confession.

"I had heard enough, however, to give me a start, and I at once began to investigate Mr. Goodwin's career. With considerable difficulty, I connected him with the Captain Flash of the gold fever days. Your evidence makes the link complete, but if I mistake not, both Dave Day and Big Bob can be compelled to become important witnesses. With a little more evidence, I can fasten the bank robbery business upon him. But the man has had a hand in a still larger game than bank robbery, if I know anything at all."

Just what this larger game was, Justin Manly did not say, and Tom did not urge him to tell anything more just then. For a moment the boy was silent, then he cried:

"Say, boss, you've got this Goodwin on the hip, an' we kin down him yit. P'raps the paper won't do him no good."

"We don't want him to get possession of it, just the same, if we can prevent it."

"Right ye are. But how are we goin' ter stop it?"

"I don't know just now, but I have some work which I wish you would do."

"Name it."

"I want you to go into Goodwin's house and become familiar with its interior. Such a knowledge may be of benefit when I come down on him. Can you get in there?"

"I kin try."

"You must not be seen by the rascal himself. To be successful, you must work your way in by the back door. Will you try it?"

"Bet yer life. When do ye want it done?"

"Any time; the sooner the better."

Tom arose.

"I'm off, boss. I'll explore the old ranch from cellar ter garret."

Twenty minutes later, Aunt Dinah, Goodwin's black cook, was startled by seeing a ragged, jolly-appearing lad come strolling in through the open kitchen door.

It was Tom Tack, with his tattered hat pushed back on his head, and his hands thrust into the pockets of his ragged pantaloons.

"Fo' de lub ob goodness!" exclaimed the old negress. "What fo' yo' cum in heah?"

"W'y, aunty, I smelled them cookies frum afar like the scent of battle," was Tom's prompt reply. "I'm er great feller fer' cookies, an' they 'tract me like er lump ov shugar does er fly."

"Now yo' git out ob heah!" cried the fat wench. "I'se not goin' ter hab dem cookies demolished befo' dere time. Whar yo' cum frum, chile? Yo' don' b'long roun' heah."

"Right you are, aunty. I b'long in the city ov Bawston, but I heerd there waz the best nigger cook down aroun' here that ever fried er doughnut, an' so I jest kem all the way on fut ter see her. It kinder looks like I'd hit the right place, but hanged ef I spected ter see enny secher daisy as you are, aunty. W'y, ye'r just er stunnin' ole gal."

"G'way dah wif yo' limber tongue!" cried Aunt Dinah. "Yo' can't fool me wif dat kind of chin. I'se cut my back teeth, I has."

"An' yer front ones too, an' ef I do say it, they're the han'sumest set I've ever seen outside ov a dentist's office. You must hav' been quite a belle among the young coons when you waz a gal, aunty, an' I'll bet yer c'u'd cut a dash now ef yer wanted ter."

Tom had coolly taken a chair and leaned back so that he could gaze admiringly into Aunt Dinah's round face. The old negress could not repress her amusement.

"Hi, golly!" she chuckled. "But yo's er queer chile, yo' is. What for yo' cum heah torkin' to me in dis way? I hab got no time to boddle wif such ragged trash."

"Don't bother 'bout me," urged Tom. "Go right on with yer cookin', though it does seem er shame fer you ter rooin yer complecshun over er hot stove. Guess ye hav' ter work pritty hard here."

"Dat's de troof," she assented; "an' I don' git much 'cept hard words fo' it. While I'm workin', dat lazy man, Mike, is lo'fin' roun' de barn. I'se bin callin' ob him fo' de las' ten minutes to go git me a pail ob watah."

Tom sprung up.

"That's just w'at I'm made fer, aunty. Pass the pail an' show me ther pump. I allus liked ter wait on good-lookin' girls."

In a moment he had the pail and was away after the water, leaving Aunt Dinah staring after him in puzzled surprise. It was quite unusual for any one around that house to express a willingness to wait on her.

When Tom came back, he was rewarded with

several hot cookies, which he found decidedly palatable.

"I tell you, aunty, I'm er mighty handy chap ter hav' roun' ther house," he observed.

"Well, dat's what dey needs roun' dis house," was Aunt Dinah's assertion.

"P'raps I kin strike er job with ther boss then."

The negress shook her head.

"No, yo' can't, chile. He's got ernuff critters roun' heah, such as dey are."

"Twon't do no hurt ter try. Where is ther boss now?"

"Don' know dat. He went out an' habn't got back yet."

"When did he go?"

"Early in de mawnin'."

"Wal, I'm goin' ter wait roun' till he cum back. P'raps I kin make a trade with him."

With this Tom tilted his chair back against the wall, and prepared to take things comfortable. He was watching closely for an opportunity to slip away from the kitchen and explore the place.

The opportunity soon came.

Aunt Dinah entered the other portion of the house for something, leaving the kitchen door ajar. Tom arose and watched her till a door hid her from view. Then the boy stole swiftly and cautiously forward in the wench's footsteps.

CHAPTER XIV.

BETRAYED BY A SNEEZE.

THE sound of a piano had come to Tom's ears as soon as Aunt Dinah opened the kitchen door. As he stole forward, the sound became plainer and he soon decided from whence it came. There were several doors from which to select, and the boy was aided in his choice by hearing the piano and knowing which way the old negress went. He wished to avoid Aunt Dinah on her return, and he had no desire to be seen by the one who was playing on the piano.

"Here's fer luck," he breathed, as he softly turned the knob of a door and stepped onward into a dark, carpeted room.

Thus far things had worked well. Opening another door, he found himself in a large hall and the sound of the piano came to his ears with startling distinctness. Tom paused in alarm, but moved forward in a moment.

"Guess ther ole planner hain't in here," he thought.

At the foot of the wide stairway he found a door slightly ajar, and peeping into the handsome room, Tom saw the piano in a distant corner. A rather pretty girl was playing, and the boy at once decided that this was Goodwin's daughter, of whom Tilly had spoken. Tom watched her a few moments, then started up the stairs.

"Ole Goodwin hain't at home," he thought, "an' I don't guess there'll be much trubble 'bout 'splorin' ther upper regions."

The soft carpet on the stairs completely deadened the sound of his footsteps. He reached the landing and turned to the left. The first door that he tried yielded to his touch, and to his delight, he found himself peering into the very room where Silas Goodwin and Big Bob had met the previous evening.

"My stars!" he muttered. "Here's luck. This is ther ole rat's den an' ther rat is gone. W'at er chance ter inspec'!"

He went in and softly closed the door behind him. The room was a pleasant one and was sumptuously furnished. Near a window stood a handsome black walnut writing-desk, and in one corner was a small safe. Before the desk was a revolving office chair. There were two or three other chairs, one of which was a handsome plush-covered easy-chair. There was a small sofa in the room and the floor was covered by an elegant carpet. Evidently Silas Goodwin believed in taking comfort. At one side there was a door which evidently opened into a sleeping room. Tom tried it and found it locked.

"By gingerbread!" exclaimed Tom. "This is gay. I don't keer ef I sit down."

He flung himself down in the easy-chair, but barely had he done so, when he heard the front door open and close, then he heard the voices of two persons who were ascending the stairs.

"Jeerusa'lem!" gasped Tom as he leaped to his feet and glanced around. "What am I goin' ter do? That's ole Goodwin!"

His first thought was to escape by a window, but a glance showed him that both were closed and fastened by patent burglar locks. Then he saw the sofa placed across one corner of the room. In an instant he was squeezing himself down behind that.

But, quickly though he had moved, Tom would have been detected had not Silas Goodwin fumbled a moment with the door. Just as Tom got settled, Goodwin opened the door and entered the room, followed by Big Bob.

"It is confounded strange that I left this door unlocked," growled the master of the house. "That is something which I seldom do, but I was in a hurry. Sit down, Sam."

Goodwin's delay in opening the door had been caused by his trying to unlock it.

Peering from beneath the sofa, Tom saw the feet of the two men and smiled at the contrast. The shoes on Big Bob's feet were not mates; one was out at the toes, the other run over at the heel. Goodwin's shoes fitted like fine gloves and shone like polished mirrors, yet the hidden lad imagined that there was something strangely sinister and villainous about those shoes.

"We need a little air here," observed the owner of the polished shoes as he threw up a window. "There, that is refreshing."

The boy behind the sofa thought so. He had been sweating when he left the kitchen, and the

closed room had seemed bad enough ere he crept behind the sofa. There it was almost insufferable.

Tom knew that Big Bob had come to exchange the paper for money. He had failed to secure that five thousand dollars the night before, but he had again secured the paper and returned for the money.

Goodwin was in no pleasant temper, despite his smooth speech, and although Big Bob accepted the invitation to sit down, Goodwin remained on his feet, restlessly pacing the floor.

"Confound it all, Sam Simpson!" he growled. "If you had never stolen that paper, I woud not be in this beastly scrape. How did you dare to do it?"

Big Bob laughed uneasily.

"Wal, cap'n, I saw ye featherin' yer own nest, an' I kinder hankered arter er few ov ther feathers."

Goodwin paused in front of the tramp.

"Sam," he said, impressively, "you fooled with fire when you touched that document. I have sworn a score of times to let daylight follow a lead pill through your carcass if it ever turned out that you were the thief. But something holds my hand. I hope I am done with bloodshed forever. However, that paper must be recovered at any cost."

"Guess ye'd be willin' ter give more'n five thousand fer it now?" with an interrogative inflection.

"Yes, if forced to the wall, I would be willing to give considerable more than that."

"Bout how much?"

Silas Goodwin gazed sharply at the big tramp.

"You talk as if you think you know where you can put your hand on the paper."

"P'raps I do."

"Whom do you suspect?"

"Hole on, cap'n; ye hain't tolle how much you'd give ter git yer han's on ther paper."

Goodwin uttered an angry exclamation.

"Don't trifile with me, Sam. It isn't healthy."

"Hain't no triflin' 'bout it. I want ter hear yer figgers."

"I would give twice what I offered you last night—that is, ten thousand."

"I'll take ther dosh, cap'n. Here's ther paper."

Had a bombshell burst in that very room, Silas Goodwin could not have been more amazed. He gazed at the yellow, ragged paper which Big Bob held, as if the tramp had suddenly taken a serpent from his bosom. Finally he gained control of his power of speech.

"What's this mean?" he demanded, his voice plainly showing that he was still amazed. "How is this?"

"Wal, it's all right. This is ther dockymint. Whar's ther dosh?"

"Where did you find it? How did you again get possession of that paper?"

Big Bob laughed exultantly.

"I just went fer it, cap'n. W'at ye se'd 'bout Double Jack set me ter thinkin', an' arter we separated las' nite, I made up my min' I'd call on Jack. I didn't think ov callin' then, but 'fore long I changed mer min'. Then I struck fer Jack's cabin. W'en I got ther, I crep' up ter ther windys, which waz open, an' there I see'd Double Jack's gal a-sittin' with this paper in her han's. I'll allow that I wazn't er great while reachin' inter that windys an' grabbin' ther paper. Then I skipped, an' here I be."

Goodwin uttered an oath.

"I swear I can't understand it," he cried. "That old cripple never got the paper himself, and I don't believe that girl ever did it. Did you look into the hut?"

"Only er glance."

"Who did you see?"

"Nobuddy but ther gal an' ole Jack."

"That's er lie!" thought the boy under the sofa.

"Well, this is strange. Can it be that the girl was beneath this window last night, and that the breeze sucked the paper out so that it fell into her hands? Such a thing seems impossible."

"There wazn't no breeze ter speak ov las' nite, cap'n."

"You are right, Sam. I can't understand it. But you have the paper and are entitled to the money. It is a pretty steep price to pay for a document that was stolen from me, but my mind is mighty relieved. I have five thousand here in this safe—the sum which I drew from the Eddington bank. You will have to take a check for the other five."

Bob began a mumbled objection, but Goodwin silenced him with:

"That or nothing, you infernal two-faced scoundrel! None of your grumbly, or I may change my mind about avoiding bloodshed. I'm not going to fool a bit with you."

Bob was forced to take what he could get. Silas Goodwin approached the little safe to secure the thousand which it contained.

Tom Tack had been an interested listener to this conversation, and the lad literally burned with a desire to dash out and secure that paper. As stated, he had been sweating when he left the kitchen and at first the breeze from the open window was cool and refreshing. He had no thought that the grateful breeze would cause him to betray himself. But it did.

Suddenly he was seized with a desire to sneeze. He tried to suppress it, and for a moment succeeded. Then the desire attacked him with redoubled force. He clasped his hands over his nose and held on as if his life depended on it.

No use.

"Aitchew!"

Big Bob leaped to his feet, Goodwin wheeled as if shot.

"What was that?" he cried.

"I dunno," replied Bob, gazing around. "I guess it was a cat."

Goodwin advanced straight toward the sofa. A moment later he seized and dragged Tom Tack forth from his place of concealment.

"Yes, and this is the kind of a cat it is!" he cried.

CHAPTER XV.

TOM IN TIGHT QUARTERS.

A LOOK of consternation and fear came over the face of Big Bob when he saw Goodwin drag the boy from behind the sofa. In an instant the big tramp had recognized Tom, and he feared that the master of the house would also find a familiar look about the lad's face. Big Bob trembled from head to foot as he thought what might follow such a disclosure.

Silas Goodwin's prompt action on hearing that sneeze had not taken Tom exactly by surprise, but ere he could think of any plan of action Goodwin was upon him. For a moment Tom was frightened, then he suddenly became cool, and when Goodwin stood him on his feet, he was laughing as if he considered it all a huge joke.

"My eyes!" he exclaimed. "How you skeered me! Thort I'd bin cotched by er reg'lar ole he b'ar."

Goodwin said not a word, but gazed at the boy in a way that sent the cold chills chasing each other down Tom's spinal column. There was a cold, deadly gleam in the man's eyes which boded no good to the unlucky lad. But Tom leered up into the man's face in a manner that was little short of idiotic.

"Hi Jinks!" he snickered. "You don't seem er bit tickled tert see er feller. Hain't this er lark? Wal, I shu'd serclaim!"

"How came you behind that sofa?" demanded Silas Goodwin, icily.

"Guess I must 'a' fell there," was the prompt answer. "Went ter sleep on thet there delightful cot-bed an' I must 'a' rolled right off over the back ov it."

"A likely story! You are a spy."

"Dunno but I be, boss," chuckled the lad, "but I never was called that afore. Folks most ginerally sez I'm er kid, an' er good menny call me er blamed fool. Dad allus sed I didn't know beans w'en the bag waz open, an' marm sed I knew as much as dad ever did. I allus thort both ov 'em didn't know er-nuff ter hurt 'em enny."

Goodwin shook Tom savagely.

"Let up on that confounded grinning," he commanded. "You can't play the fool on me. What are you here for?"

"For fun," replied Tom, evidently struggling to suppress a snicker; "an' I'm havin' jest haydoogins ov it. Gal down-stairs plays the pinnier; nigger woman in the kitchen makin' hot cookies. By gingerhead! This is er jolly ranch. Cullered gal sed ye needed er kid 'bout my size 'roun' here, so I just cum right up an' waited ter see if I c'u'dn't strike er job. Laid down on thet new-fangled cot-bed an' rolled right off over the back. Jiminy crickets! w'at er great big time!"

Then Tom burst into a perfect convulsion of laughter, came near choking, and finally coughed till the tears ran down his cheeks.

"An' ter be taken fer er cat—oh, Lawd!"

He was about going into another fit, when Goodwin again shook him fiercely.

"Let up on that, I tell you!" growled the puzzled villain. "How much did you hear while you lay behind that sofa?"

"Hear? Never heard nothin' till I sneezed rite out in my sleep an' woked myself up. Then I didn't know where I waz. Say, I guess you're the boss ov this ranch. Want ter hire er kid 'bout my size? I'm open fur engagements."

"Where do you belong?"

"In Bawston, boss. Dad did own er magnificent residence in the most 'ristocratic part ev Mud Avenoo till they kem down onter him, 'cause he didn't pay his rent, an' kicked us all inter the street. Then dad guv me the dirty shake, an' I've bin hustlin' fer myself ever since."

Goodwin had been watching the boy closely, and now he exclaimed:

"I have it! You're the chap who stole the paper last night."

"Paper?" mumbled Tom, looking as if he was dazed. "W'at paper?"

"You know well enough what I mean. You can't make me believe that you are a fool, for yours is not a fool's face. Who hired you to steal that paper?"

Tom's under jaw dropped.

"Now don't go fer ter 'cuse me ov stealin'!" he cried. "I hain't no thief! Pop allus sed I didn't know ernuff ter nick."

"But you stole that paper just the same last night and you can't squirm out of it. That is enough to send you to prison."

"Now don't do thet, boss!" whined Tom, beginning to sniffle. "I never done nothin', 'deed I never—I w'u'dn't 'a' kem here, only thet nigger woman sed ye needed er boy 'roun' thet house. I thort p'raps I c'u'd git er job doin' su'thin'. Ef ye don't want ter hire no boy, I'll go right erway."

Big Bob had been watching Tom play his part, and the big tramp's fear turned to interest, and from interest to surprise. He had expected that Tom would recognize him, but to his joy the lad did not even look at him. Bob began to think that Tom would succeed in deceiving Silas Goodwin, and making that worthy believe that he was simply a half-witted lad, who had wandered in there by accident.

But Goodwin was too shrewd to be deceived, although Tom played his part well. The man studied Tom's face sharply for several seconds, during which his mind was busy. He believed that Tom had stolen the paper the night before, and close at

the heels of this belief came the memory of what Dave Day had said about knowing where to put his hand on the boy that Goodwin had hired Big Bob to dispose of.

Was this the boy?

The question startled Silas Goodwin, and he peered into Tom's face more keenly than before. He fancied that he saw a familiar look there—nay, it was no fancy! He was sure that he did.

Suddenly Silas Goodwin unbuttoned the lad's coat and slipped it off. He seemed to be laboring under suppressed excitement.

Big Bob saw this act, and his face became white with terror. He glanced around for a means of retreat. The open window was at hand, but a jump from the balcony might mean broken limbs. There was the door. It would take but an instant to spring forward and tear it open, but he knew full well how swiftly Captain Flash could draw and shoot. He was certain that he would feel the death-dealing bullet ere he could escape. Suppressing a groan of mental anguish, he sunk helplessly into the chair from which he had arisen a few moments before.

"Roll up the sleeve on your left arm," commanded Goodwin, restraining his excitement.

"W'at fur, boss?" whined Tom. "I hain't done nothin'. Are ye goin' ter punish me?"

With an impatient oath, Goodwin seized the ragged sleeve and stripped it up. The tattooed letters were revealed.

Goodwin uttered a hoarse cry, and staggered back as if dealt a heavy blow.

"Great God!" he groaned.

Big Bob felt as if his minutes were numbered. He nerved himself for a desperate struggle, and arose to his feet.

For a moment Silas Goodwin seemed too astounded to make any move. Suddenly, with a snarled oath, he wheeled toward the big tramp, crouching with clinched hands and blazing eyes, as if to launch himself at Bob's throat.

"Keep off! Keep off!" shouted Bob, retreating a step, and putting up his hands.

"You infernal liar!" hissed the enraged man, as he advanced a step. "You shall pay dearly for this double treachery. I will have your heart's blood!"

"Don't ye tetch me, cap'n!" cried Bob. "I swear I threw thet kid inter the river, and I saw him sink afore my very eyes. Don't ye tetch me, I tell ye!"

"Don't lie more!" snarled the furious villain. "You never threw him into the river. You let him live that you might wring hush-money from me. You have played me false in a score of ways, and now—"

Swift as thought, Silas Goodwin snatched out a revolver. Then Big Bob leaped forward, and caught his hand ere he could fire. An instant the two glared into each other's eyes like furious wild beasts; then they clinched, and a terrible struggle ensued.

As if fascinated by the scene, the boy tramp stood and watched the two men. He saw murder gleam from Goodwin's eyes, and he saw a desperate resolve on Big Bob's face, which showed that the tramp fully understood his danger and would fight to the last. Back and forth, round and round went the two men, panting, gasping, fighting for life.

Suddenly Goodwin's revolver was accidentally discharged. The shot arcused Tom to the full sense of his position, and he saw his chance to escape. Wheeling swiftly, he tore open the door and dashed out. As he did so, he heard Big Bob shout:

"There goes thet kid!"

Tom uttered a shout, and the next moment was astide the banister of the stairs. As he slid swiftly downward, he cried:

"Good-by, ole Goodwin!"

Just as he reached the bottom, he saw Goodwin appear at the head of the stairs, revolver in hand.

"Stop!" shouted the villain.

"C'u'dn't think ov it," laughed the boy, as he seized the knob of the front door.

The door refused to move.

Wheeling like a flash, he dashed along the hall, noticing that Goodwin was half-way down the stairs. The villain cried out to him again, but Tom did not pause. He succeeded in tearing open a door and dashing into another room. Through this he plunged and tore open another door to find himself in the kitchen. Then he was seized by stout hands, and a hearty voice cried:

"Arrah, phwat's this, Oi'd loike t'know! It's the devil's own row as is bein' raised nigh the tap ov ther hoose, an' thin yez cumns skatherin' along loike ther Auld B'y was afther yez. Phwat hav' yez bin up tez now?"

"Let go!" shouted the boy, struggling with all his strength to break away.

"Hooldon, childber," laughed the Irishman. "Don't be afther gittin' away in sooch a rush now."

"Hang to him, Mike!" cried Goodwin, suddenly appearing. "He is a thief. I caught the young scoundrel in my room."

"An' begobs, I thort as mooch whin ther young rat kim boocin' inther ther kitchen, an' so I just sazed 'im."

"I 'clare to goodness!" cried Aunt Dinah, who thus far had been dumb with surprise. "Dat's de chile dat kem roun' fo' de job, an' I fort he was gone away."

"He sneaked into my room, and was filling his pockets, with everything he could lay his hands on," declared Goodwin. "Come, Mike, we will put him in a safe place till I can deliver him up to the law."

Then Tom was dragged back into the room adjoining the kitchen. There Goodwin procured a

light, and bidding Mike follow, with the boy, opened a door and descended into the darkness of the cellar.

Then the Irishman dragged the unfortunate boy down into the dark depths, from which Tom might never come forth alive.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SURPRISE FOR SILAS.

Down into the dark cellar Tom Tack was dragged by the stout Irishman. Goodwin walked ahead, carrying the light and saying not a word. Tom made no outcry, but he watched for a chance to break away from his captors. He had resolved to make a desperate attempt to escape if given an opportunity, but no such opportunity came.

Finally Silas Goodwin halted before a wall of stones and cement, in which was set a heavy iron door. Reaching up, he took down a large iron key from where it lay in a niche among the stones. Then he unlocked and pulled open the door, the rusty hinges of which seemed to utter a mingled shriek and groan of a decidedly blood-chilling nature. Tom shuddered with horror as he saw the dark, dungeon-like place beyond.

"There, I think he will be safe in there," observed Goodwin.

"Oi think so meself," admitted Mike, soberly.

Suddenly the boy faced Goodwin, his eyes glowing like twin balls of light.

"Silas Goodwin, Cap'n Flash, or whatever yer name is," he cried, "you may chuck me inter this hole, but I'm goin' ter cum out erg'in, an' don't ye fergit it. You're pritty ternal nigh ther end ov yer rope, an' ther fu'st thing ye know, you'll be in the stone jug, where ye'd orter bin twenty y'ars ergo. I'm goin' ter live ter see ye ahind iron bars."

Goodwin uttered an oath.

"Why, you infernal little thief!" he shouted. "What do you mean by talking like this to me?"

"You know w'at I mean," answered Tom, as he pointed one finger accusingly at the villain. "Yer hired er tuff ter kill me w'en I waz a little squawker, but I've turned up erlive w'en ye didn't s'pect it. Ye may chuck me inter thet hole an' try ter kill me, but I'll kem out erlive an' down ye enter ther last end ov ther game. Mark that!"

The scoundrel involuntarily shrunk back before the lad whom he had so greatly wronged. The boy's shrill voice seemed to fill the entire cellar. The light in Goodwin's hand threw its rays full into the man's face, and showed it white and almost fear-stricken. The forms of the three men made fantastic shadows, which seemed endowed with life, as they swayed here and there around the group; the old cellar appeared to be filled with hidden horrors of an unknown nature.

The shrill voice of the boy continued:

"An' now ye'r' livin' on w'at's rightfully mine, you ole shark. You've stole it in sum way, but ye hain't goin' ter keep it long. Ther day ov reckenin' is putty nigh, an' fu'st you know you'll be brought up with er roun' turn. Even now, Silas Goodwin, ther han' ov Jlestice is lifted ter give ye a blow w'at'll knock ye plum' out. It's er cummin'—it's er cummin', an' ye can't s'cape it!"

The boy's words chilled the villain's blood and rung in his ears like a prophecy. He forced a hoarse laugh, and cried:

"Chuck the little rat in, Mike. We can't stop here to listen to his rantings. In he goes!"

Then Tom was thrust into the dark dungeon, and the door closed behind him with a groan and a clang.

Turning the iron key and leaving it in the lock, Silas Goodwin made haste to leave the cellar and its shadow phantoms. The Irishman followed at his heels.

Once outside, Goodwin charged both the Irishman and the negress to say nothing of what had occurred. The boy, he said, he would lodge in jail at his earliest convenience; till then he would keep him in the cellar.

Then Goodwin ascended to the room where he had left Big Bob. He found that that worthy had improved the opportunity to "make himself scarce."

"The infernal traitor is gone," muttered the chief scoundrel, as he glanced around. "He has gone. He played me false. I could have overlooked the theft of the paper, for I have hoped to live without ever again staining my hands in blood but when I discovered how he had used me, I was ready to take his life. Dangers seem to be multiplying around me. That boy turns up at an unfortunate moment, but I have him safe for the present. I must think of some way to dispose of him."

He threw himself down in the easy-chair and wiped the cold moisture from his face with a spotless white handkerchief. Silas Goodwin's nerves had been severely taxed within the hour.

For nearly thirty minutes he lay back in the chair, his beardless face the picture of conflicting emotions. His evil thoughts were plainly written on his countenance—so plainly, indeed, that his neighbors would scarcely have recognized him at first glance. Ordinarily he was a rather mild-appearing individual, but now his face resembled a plotting fiend's.

Finally, he muttered his plans aloud:

"I will dispose of the boy some way—poison will be the best. His body shall be buried in the cellar. I will tell Mike and Dinah that I concluded to let him go. They will never suspect. That will settle his hash forever and I shall be free from one great danger."

"But Sam Simpson escaped with that paper. I must recover and destroy it at once. I was a fool in not destroying it years ago, and I cannot understand what made me preserve it."

"The words of that infernal boy ring in my ears now. They appeared like a prophecy, but I can afford to laugh at them when once I get the paper. I will go at once and find Sam Simpson. He shall give up that paper, or die!"

Then the disturbed villain hastily arose and descended the stairs. Seizing a hat from the rack near the door he quickly left the house.

Noon had passed when Silas Goodwin returned. He looked angry and alarmed. He ran up to his room for a moment, and unlocked the little safe in the corner, from which he took a small vial of whitish-appearing liquid.

"Poison!" he muttered, hoarsely. "Enough of it to kill a score of men. With it I shall thoroughly doctor that boy's diet. I wish I could give some of the same to Double Jack and the girl! The girl is not near so dangerous as the boy, though, for there is no mark by which she can be distinguished.

"I failed to find a trace of Sam Simpson, but I will find him—I must! He has probably been frightened away, fearing my vengeance. He cannot get far, for he has no money. It is possible that he is still in hiding in this vicinity. I shall go to Eddington this afternoon."

Twenty minutes later Tom Tack heard the iron key turn in the dungeon lock. The door swung open and Silas Goodwin appeared, bearing food and a light. The tray of food he set down on the ground, at the same time saying:

"Here, youngster, is victuals. I don't mean to starve you, if I do keep you a prisoner for a short time. Don't be afraid to eat; there's more where this came from. Eat heartily."

Then he closed the door, locked it, and turned away with a terrible smile on his face.

Goodwin soon ordered his carriage. Ere he departed, he strictly forbade Mike or Dinah going near the boy in the cellar. There was no danger of his own daughter entering the prison, as she was extremely afraid of darkness.

The sun had set and daylight given place to the shades of a glorious summer evening when Goodwin returned. He did not notice the dim light which shone from the windows of his room, but, giving the team into Mike's charge, he entered the house and ascended the stairs. He unlocked the door to his room, little dreaming of the surprise which was to follow.

As the door swung open, he uttered an exclamation of amazement, for the room was dimly lighted and he perceived a dark form in the easy-chair. Straight into the room he strode, only to pause and utter an ejaculation of astonishment as the light suddenly flared up, brilliantly illuminating the room.

Before him sat Tom Tack!

"Evenin', boss!" laughed the boy, coolly. "I've bin waitin' fer ye fer a long time. Guess yer business at Eddin'tun kep' ye longer'n ye s'pected."

"Satan's fury!" snarled the amazed scoundrel. "What does this mean?"

"It means that I want ter tork with ye, boss. Sot down a jiff."

But the man was too amazed to do anything just then. Before him sat the boy whom he had thought dead!

"W'y ye don't seem er bit pleased ter see er feller" cried Tom. "I's posed ye'd be 'most tickled outer yer boots w'en ye kem in an' foun' me sottin' heer."

"How did you escape?" gasped Goodwin.

"Scape frum w'are? Do ye took me fer er loonetic as has bruck outer a 'sylum?!"

"Did you eat the food I brought?"

"Wal, not enny! I'm er leetle too sharp ter swaller rat-p'isen even w'en I'm shut inter er rat-hole."

"Poison! Why—what—?"

"Just that, Silas Goodwin. Ye tried ter p'isen me, but ther little game didn't work. I tole ye I'd cum outer ther hoel an' down ye ontoer ther wind-up ov ther game. I'm out, an' ther game's ther same as finished."

"You're out, but back you go again. I will put you out of my path, Clarence Goodwin, if I have to strangle the life out of your body with my own hands!"

"Sho! Ye don't say! So, my name's Clarence Goodwin, is it? Wal, ef I'm enny 'lation ter you I'll commit susanside outer shame fer myself, ye ornery skunk!"

"In no way are you relative of mine, but if you were I would not hesitate now, for it is either your life or my liberty."

"Then I reckon it's your liberty," and with these words Tom uttered a sharp whistle, at which call three men sprung into the room. Two were uniformed officers; the third was Detective Manly! The latter covered Goodwin with a revolver, and commanded, sternly:

"Surrender, Captain Flash, or take the consequences!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THEIR JUST DUES.

The villain's surprise was complete. His face turned ashy pale, for he realized that his big game was ended and he had lost. He clinched his hands and appeared about to spring upon the detective, but Manly's cold, calm words restrained him:

"Don't try it, Captain Flash. I am here to take you, dead or alive, and by heavens! I am going to do it!"

The trapped villain seemed to regain his composure and spoke:

"What does this mean, gentlemen? Why are you here, and what do you want?"

"It is no use to try bluff," said the detective,

quietly. "It won't work, for I have a clear case against you. You did not find that big tramp when you searched for him this forenoon simply because he and his partner were then in my hands, under arrest. From his lips I heard the story of what occurred in this room, this morning, thus learning that this boy, whom I sent here as a spy, was in your hands. With haste, I made my way to Eddington and dispatched to Rockford for two officers. They came on the afternoon Express, and we saw you in Eddington when we left for this place. To release the boy and silence the servants was a small job; then we laid this trap into which you stepped.

"It is all up, Silas Goodwin, or whatever your name may be. The rightful will of Henry Goodwin is in my possession, and Sam Simpson will testify against you. Money will unseal the lips of old Dave Day. Surrender!"

"Hold one moment," commanded the villain, coldly waving Manly back. "Let me understand this affair. What is the charge against me?"

"There are several. Slippery Jim, who was your accomplice in the Hilton bank robbery, confessed before he croaked. I have positive proof that you aided him on that job. But, back of that, when known as Captain Flash in California, you were wanted for murder. For nearly thirteen years you have held possession of property which your brother, Henry Goodwin willed to his twin children, Clarence and Lucy, should the latter ever be found. If she was not, the property should go entirely to the boy."

"This is all very well," retorted the beaten rascal. "Have you a warrant?"

"I have."

"Show it."

But, before Manly could do so, Captain Flash wheeled swift as thought and sprung out through the window, which was still open. The move was unexpected, and the desperate man was on the balcony ere any one could stop him.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed. "Beaten but not trapped! Good-by!"

Then he leaped from the balcony downward into the darkness.

Manly followed swiftly, with the Boy Tramp at his heels. Like a cat, the lad swung himself over the rail and slid down one of the posts. A moment later he cried in a voice of triumph:

"He's down here, boss, an' I guess he's all broke up, 'cause he don't stir."

Bending over the rail, the men above saw a dark form stretched on the ground with the lad stooping over it. A faint moan of pain came up to their ears.

"We will be right down," said the detective, as he let down the hammer of the revolver which he had cocked as he sprung through the open window.

A few minutes later they lifted the discomfited scoundrel and bore him into the house, where he was placed on a bed. One of his legs was broken in two places.

Mike was immediately dispatched for a physician, with orders not to spare his horse, and a promise that he should be well paid if he returned within a certain time.

When the injured villain was given a drink of strong liquor, he looked around and saw the Boy Tramp by the bedside. He smiled grimly, and said:

"Your words were prophetic, my lad. You came out of that dungeon alive, and you will live to see me behind iron bars. My hand in this game is entirely played out, and I give up beaten. I am ready to make a full confession. If my leg pains me too bad, give me more of the liquor."

"More than twenty years ago, Silas Goodwin went to California to search for a fortune among the gold mines. Behind he left his brother Henry, who had just been married to a beautiful young lady. Silas declared that he would never return East, or communicate with his relatives and friends until he had made a fortune.

"Right here I will tell you that *I am not the true Silas Goodwin*. Like him I was an Eastern man. We met, and even our most intimate friends were puzzled to distinguish one from the other, so much alike were we. We became friends, worked together, lived together, and shared everything equally. Thus I learned all about him, his friends, relatives, and past life.

"Finally we drifted apart. I married a Spanish girl, and by her had one child, a daughter. I will not tell you how my wife met her death, but let me say that her dastardly murderer was the first man I ever killed. Then I became a very wicked man, for I cared naught for my own life or the lives of those around me. Finally, as the leader of a band of desperate robbers, I was known as Captain Flash, and a price was placed on my head. The Vigilantes and officers pursued me closely, finally capturing alive one of my men, Double Jack, and forcing him to tell all he knew concerning myself and the band. Double Jack escaped the death of a traitor by flying eastward; but the band was closely pushed, and at last was broken up. Still there was a price upon my head, and I was an outlaw.

"One night, wearing a mask, and acting as a lone road agent, I held up a solitary traveler in a dark pass. He resisted, and I shot him dead. When I held a lighted match before his face, I saw that I had slain my old pard and double, Silas Goodwin. Before an hour I had formed a bold and daring resolve. I was tired of living like a hunted animal; I would go East and begin life again as Silas Goodwin, an honest man. Captain Flash should cease to exist, and it did almost seem that I had buried my old self in the grave where I placed the murdered Silas Goodwin.

"Meanwhile my daughter had been placed in the

hands of true friends, who promised to rear and educate her.

"I came East, and found Henry Goodwin on his death-bed. He was easily led to believe that I was his brother, and he welcomed me as well as he could. His wife was dead. Three years before his wife had given birth to twins, a boy and girl. When the little girl was about a year old, she had been abducted, and although Henry Goodwin, who had made a large fortune in speculation, had spent money freely in the attempt, the child's fate was then a mystery. The uncertainty and worry caused the mother's death.

"You, my boy, are the son of Henry Goodwin, and your name is Clarence Egbert Goodwin. He had your initials tattooed on your left arm, so that if you were ever stolen, or lost, there would be a mark by which you could be identified. Your father had made a will, leaving all his property to you and your sister, were she ever found. If she was never found, it was all to fall to you. This will he did not alter, but I got possession of it, and, with the aid of his rascally lawyer, who was ready to do anything for money, forged another. By this forged will, I was given half the property and made guardian of Henry Goodwin's boy. If Clarence Goodwin did not live to marry or reach the age of twenty-one, the entire property should come into my hands, providing, of course, that the lost daughter did not turn up.

"My scheme was a perfect success. Henry Goodwin died and I found things pretty much in my hands to do with as I chose. But I wanted the boy removed from my sight; I longed to control the entire property. My chance soon came.

"I was amazed when one day one of my old band of California marauders presented himself before me, but I soon found a way to make Sam Simpson useful. I paid him well to abduct the boy and end his life in some manner. Simpson readily agreed to do so, and I arranged it so that he was far away ere I raised a hue-and-cry. I offered big rewards for the recovery of the boy, but he was not found by the detectives. A year later, Simpson presented himself before me, swore that he had killed the child and asked for more money. I gave him some and continued to do so for several years.

"I do not know what made me preserve the genuine will. It was a piece of folly of which I ought to be ashamed. That will was finally stolen by Sam Simpson. Had I known at the time that Simpson was the one who got the paper, it would have made a difference with me. As it was, I became alarmed and disposed of the property, which I found little trouble in doing. Then I sought to hide myself from my former accomplice, Simpson, and succeeded in doing so until, as Big Bob, he found me here.

"When I came here, I sent for my daughter, and she has lived with me ever since. Shortly after I came here, Double Jack, the traitor, turned up, and in his possession was a little girl whom he claimed was Lucy Goodwin, the lost twin. He swore that he himself stole the child, hoping to obtain a large sum of ransom money for her. In order to keep his mouth closed, I paid him a certain sum of money and with the girl, whom he called his niece, he has lived in the little hut down by the old stream ever since. There is no doubt in my mind but that the girl, Tilly, is Lucy Goodwin, sister to Clarence, and half-heir to this property.

"I acknowledge that Slippery Jim and I cracked the Hilton Bank. Everything else must be understood by you. As for my fate—well, I must try and face it like a man."

During the recital, which had been somewhat disconnected on account of the acute pain caused by his broken leg, he had taken frequent drinks of liquor. He now called for his daughter, but they told him that she had been taken away that she might not witness any unpleasant scenes connected with his arrest. He thanked them for their kindness.

Later a physician appeared and attended to his broken limb.

We will not attempt to describe in full what followed. Both Big Bob, or Sam Simpson, and Dave Day, the Double Jack of Captain Flash's band, testified against the false Silas Goodwin, whose true name was Enoch Mason. The scoundrel was convicted of the charge against him and given a twenty years' sentence.

Through the intercession of Clarence and his sister Lucy, both Dave Day and Big Bob were allowed to go unpunished. As there was no charge against Jim Snap, he had improved the first opportunity to leave that part of the country.

Enoch Mason's daughter was given a liberal purse by the kind-hearted brother and sister who had both been so deeply wronged by her father. With her face damp with tears of gratitude, she thanked them and bade them good-by forever.

Mason acknowledged that he received sixteen thousand dollars of the twenty-one stolen from the Hilton Bank, and that amount was restored. Detective Justin Manly was paid well for his services by the bank.

Our "Tilly," the real Lucy Goodwin, was delighted when she learned that "Tom Tack" was her twin brother. The children were permitted to choose a guardian, and in Justin Manly they found a strictly honest and conscientious friend, who did everything in his power for their good.

The gentlemanly Clarence Goodwin is not much like the ragged, sharp-eyed Boy Tramp of this story, but for all that, his good fortune has not spoiled him. As his sister declares, "he is the best brother that sister ever had." He is in college now, and hopes to graduate with honors. And, as Justin Manly declared, "he is sure to make his mark in the world."

THE END.

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